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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Alternative Education, Youth and Vulnerability: a Quest for Genuine Re-engagement or a Reification of 'the Normal'?

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Abstract

Alternative education has been increasingly viewed as an antidote to risk and vulnerability among young people who have disengaged from education. In this paper, I maintain that despite their relational and needs-based approach, alternative education practices driven by the imperative to recognise and treat differences fall short of addressing the underlying conditions that (re)produce disengagement, risk and vulnerability for young people. I anchor my argument in data collected from an alternative educational program designed for 'at-risk' young people in a secondary government school in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on theoretical contributions from feminist scholarship, including Butler's notion of vulnerability and the limits of empathy in inter-subjective relations, I demonstrate how the alternative education program ultimately worked to reinscribe wider deficit discourses that rendered marginalised young people unrecognisable in the first place. I also draw on the notions of affective dissonance and affective solidarity to suggest how alternative education can contribute to a critical-reflexive stance by harnessing the disruptive qualities of affects to build solidarity with 'the other' and undo the normative restrictions that undermine the capacity of marginalised youth to persevere in life as recognisable subjects in the institution.

Keywords Affective solidarity · Affective dissonance · Alternative education · Disengagement · Vulnerability · Youth

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Introduction

There has been significant growth in the number of alternative education programs in recent years. These programs are increasingly viewed as antidote to the problem of disengagement from formal education among groups of young people who are identified as 'at risk' and 'vulnerable'. In Australia, for instance, well over 900 alternative education programs operate accommodating for over 70,000 students each year (Te Riele 2014). Many of these programs are designed to address the more complex needs of socio-economically marginalised young people who have 'tuned out' and 'disengaged' from mainstream schools and are thus at risk of early school leaving. Policy arguments in support of alternative education are often made on the grounds of improved productivity and subsequent economic gains achieved by re-engaging young people with learning and facilitating their post-secondary school transition, often into employment or further vocational education or trades.

The growth of alternative education has led to growing interest in and discussions about their effectiveness, contributions and shortfalls (Mills et al. 2017). This paper draws upon and advances these debates to examine the position that alternative education occupies within the broader framework of education. My focus, in particular, is on the transformative potential of alternative education in exposing and disrupting the conditions that produce risk and vulnerability for groups of young people. Drawing on data collected as part of an ethnographic study conducted in a government secondary school in the state of Victoria (Dadvand 2017), I maintain that while alternative education programs often produce connectedness to their physical and relational geographies, they can reinscribe the narratives that categorise and divide, and in so doing render the subjecthood of the young people that they serve unrecognisable within schools and classrooms.

Of particular relevance to my discussions are feminist and post-colonial theoretical contributions about the limits of 'empathy' as a privileged way of connecting with 'the other' (Kaplan 1992) and the importance of affective solidarity in transformative politics (Hemmings 2012). Empathy, while associated with care for the marginalised, may normalise unequal power relations and give legitimacy to dominant frames of misrecognition. Affective solidarity, instead, offers a more productive strategy for transcending inter-subjective differences towards shared responsibility and a politics of transformation that is rooted in our sense of vulnerability within inter-subjective encounters. The connections to alternative education, as I argue, is the extent to which these programs can help expose and disrupt institutional arrangements and practices that produce vulnerability as a product of encounters with dominant frames of misrecognition within mainstream schools.

Performative Care and Frames of (Mis)Recognition

The backdrops to my discussions about how alternative education programs can be implicated in the (re)production of vulnerability are recent reforms in education that are driven by a neoliberal politico-economic rationality. In the Australian context where this research was undertaken, these reforms have impacted on the way in which schools position themselves vis-à-vis young people, especially those young people who may face more complex circumstances due to one or a combination of factors such as their home backgrounds, material disadvantage or (dis)ability. As argued elsewhere, neoliberal education policy reforms of the past few years have contributed to the re-constitution of care along performative lines (Dadvand and Cuervo 2018, 2019). Performative care, which is founded on assumptions about students as autonomous and self-direct learners, pursues academic achievement and learning outcomes as the primary, if not the main, denominator of care towards students.

While improving learning outcomes has always been a pre-occupation for teachers in schools, and for the state in terms of youth future economic productivity (see Roberts 2020; Wyn 2009), narrow forms of accountability tied to test-based practices have given performative practices of care extra-prominence in the business of schooling today. This has had implications for young people who are both subjects of school care, and whose subjectivities are (re)constituted through school care work. Performative practices of care can delineate the horizon of intelligibility for students, and in so doing make certain groups of young people intelligible while rendering others as unrecognisable subjects (Dadvand 2020). Viewing care as a discursive force requires us to delve underneath the surface of everyday practices to make visible the multivalent operations of power which, as what Foucault (1991) maintains, can function as regimes of truth governing social spaces and subjectivities within them.

Attention to how normative discourses about students can delineate frames of recognition highlights the nexus of needs, care work and subjectification. This is where I find the work of Butler (2005) particularly helpful in thinking about how what is defined as legitimate needs within an institutional framework of care can set the parameters of intelligibility for subjects. In schools, normative judgements about who a valid care subject is exist within social, historical and political temporalities that maintain recognisability of young people. To live their lives as viable subjects, young people need to negotiate and respond to the terms of recognition which are made available to them through the everyday practices and relationships in mainstream schools. From an ethics of care perspective, these terms of recognition are increasingly framed around issues of performativity, academic standards and measurable learning outcomes.

Another issue that comes to the fore in relation to the subjectification power of performative care pertains to the 'other' who confers a sense of recogni-

tion to those who are within the horizon of normativity. For Butler, ethical engagement with the excluded 'other' requires the critique of the normative subjectification and its inherent violence against those who become unviable subjects within dominant schemes of recognition. By engaging with the excluded 'other', Butler (2005) throws into sharp relief our fundamental sociality, the reality that our existence relies upon acts of addressing others and being addressed by others. This makes 'vulnerability' not an essential quality of particular individuals, but a product of encounters with normative discourses that provide a framework for our sense of who we are, who we should be and who we can be. As Butler (2005, p. 50) points out:

The ethical valence of the situation [encounter with other] is thus not restricted to the question of whether or not my account of myself is adequate, but rather concerns whether, in giving the account, I establish a relationship to the one to whom my account is addressed and whether both parties to the interlocution are sustained and altered by the scene of address

Drawing on the work of Butler, one can argue that ethical encounters with the other require not only questioning the normative judgements that define the horizon of intelligibility, but also interrogating one's own terms and conditions of recognition. While the former task invites us to critique the regimes of truths that govern subjectification, the latter unsettles our own recognisability as subjects of critique and highlights our involvement in the suffering of the other via complex modes of implication (Rothberg 2020). Thinking ethically in a Butlerian sense about alternative education, one thus needs to address the extent to which these programs can not only confer a sense of recognition to marginalised young people within their own physical and relational settings, but also help *undo* the normative restrictions that undermine the capacity of marginalised youth to persevere in life as recognisable subjects within the institution. This is the topic that I will turn to in the next section.

Alternative Education: Contributions and Transformative Potentials

Alternative education is a slippery term and can encompass programs with different approaches and philosophies. The aims of alternative education programs can vary from behaviour management, special needs education and skills-based learning to programs that have democratic focus and agendas (e.g. McGregor et al. 2012; Mills et al. 2015). Of particular interest to my discussion in this paper are the alternative programs that provide 'a second chance' to young people who have disconnected from mainstream schools. For these young people, alternative education settings are viewed as a place to reconnect with and through education. These settings are often intensely relational and aim to create spaces of belonging for young people who do not 'fit into' mainstream classrooms due to their different, and at times more complex, needs and circumstances.

The question that I seek to address regarding the contributions of the alternative education programs that aim to re-engage the so-called at-risk students is

the extent to which these programs can intervene in the schemes of (mis)recognition and alter discursive availability in schools. Responding to the neglect of young people's needs in mainstream schools, alternative education often resorts to empathy as a way to understand and relate to disaffected youth (Powell 2003). Yet, a pedagogy of empathy can ultimately normalise problematic frames of identity if such pedagogy remains oblivious to the ways in which one might be directly implicated in the suffering of the other by the virtue of their own positioning. In her discussion about the role of feminist reflexivity within a broader transformative politics, Probyn (1993) talks about how the very materiality of our positioning can make empathising with the marginalised other difficult. While giving precedence to 'affects' as a way of understanding the suffering of the excluded, acts of empathy can remain oblivious to what Kaplan (1992) calls 'the politics of location' and the social, historical, material, political and discursive conditions which are involved in the discursive production of differences.

This is where I find the critiques of empathy relevant to alternative education programs. To be empathised with, as Hemmings (2012, p. 153) maintains, 'could be a horrific prospect, indeed, one resulting in the dissolution of the other's sense of self, if the empathetic subject is associated with violence, or if the terms of recognition (being "in need", say) are resisted'. Hemmings (2012) further highlights the limits of empathy as a basis for engagement with others for ignoring historical and political reasons, and instead proposes 'affective solidary' as a more productive approach for developing reflexive politicisation. Affective solidarity is not derived from presumptions about how the other feels but is guided by a common desire from our own lived experiences of discomfort with dominant narratives of (mis)recognition. Affective solidarity acknowledges that the status of shared identity is unviable given the very materiality of our differences. For Hemmings (2012, p. 150), a counter-episteme that capitalises on our sense of 'affective dissonance' is needed in transformative politics:

…in order to know differently we have to feel differently. Feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others; all these feelings can produce a politicised impetus to change

This is an important recognition because it places the impetus for change within our *affective responses* to what we might perceive as amiss from the social space and its relationships. Affective solidarity takes an inroad into transformative politics by capitalising on the tension between our sense of who we feel we are (our ontological stance) and the sense of how we think we should be based on the discursive knowledge made available to us about ourselves (our epistemology). As Lakämper (2017) explains, this onto-epistemological gap caused by a feeling of discrepancy between one's own lived and embodied experiences in the world and the frames of identity and positionality available to them through dominant discourses can create a sense of dissonance which can lead to a desire to influence discursive availabilities that curb our capacities to live life as subjects worthy of recognition.

This is of particular relevance to the contributions that alternative education programs can make within the framework of care in education for 'vulnerable' and 'at-risk' youth. To alter narrow discursive availabilities, alternative education needs to, following Rothberg's (2020) notion of implication, shift away from empathising with marginalised youth to exposing the complex ways in which everyday practices and institutional arrangements of schools are implicated in reproducing the conditions of possibility for their predicaments. This is by no means an easy undertaking and requires not only adopting a critical-reflexive stance that makes visible complex implications, including self-implication, in the suffering of the other, but also tapping into the political potential of affective dissonance to create a sense of shared responsibility for changing the conditions that produce risk and vulnerability.

In the remainder of this paper, I draw on my conceptual discussions to examine how an alternative education program designed to reconnect a group of disengaged students to the mainstream school created an intensely relational space of belonging for them. I will also examine how the program, despite some of its intensely relational practices, still operated within the wider framework of recognition about students as performative subjects which limited the horizon of intelligibility for disengaged young people in the mainstream school. While the program focused on differences in order to address them, it left the centre from within which those differences were instituted largely intact. In doing so, the program ultimately contributed to the re-inscription of 'the normal' charging the excluded other with task of re-doing themselves as a pre-condition for their re-engagement with the institution.

The Study: Background and Context

The data that I report from in this article was collected as part of a larger study that examined the school encounters and experiences that led to disengagement among a group of 'at-risk' students in a government secondary school in the state of Victoria, Australia (see Dadvand 2017). The study used an ethnographic research design to explore the processes of knowledge construction and identity formation through deeper engagement with the participants in the context of their everyday practices and relationships in an alternative education setting. Due to limits of scope and purpose, I only draw on part of the data from the larger study including the school profile data, field notes from 140 h of participant observation over a period of 8 months in the alternative education program, as well as parts of focus group discussion and interview data with a group of 14 students, the school principal and two teachers.

The School Context

The study was conducted a government secondary school in a low socio-economic status suburb in outer Melbourne. I refer to the school as Rosewood High School (a pseudonym). The suburb where Rosewood High School is

located in is fast gentrifying neighbourhood with relatively high rates of unemployment. Despite being located in a low socio-economic suburb, Rosewood High School is recognised for 'academic excellence'. According to My School Website, a publicly accessible platform that provides information about schools in Australia, Rosewood High School had about 200 teaching and non-teaching staff accommodating for about 2,000 students in 2019. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)[1] also shows that 87% of those who attend Rosewood High School are from the middle and top quarters.

The data from My School Website also shows that in 2018, about 50% of Year 12 students at Rosewood High School moved into further education at universities, 21% entered Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and 10% transitioned directly into employment. Because of its reputation as a high performing and academic school, Rosewood High School receives more enrolment applications than it can accommodate. As the principal explains, the popularity of the school is such that some 'middle-class' parents move to the school neighbourhood zone yeas ahead to secure a space for children. As a testimony to its 'quality education' and as an incentive for attracting high achieving students, the school showcases its state-of-the-art facilities and learning spaces, high-quality teaching, extra-curricular activities, outdoor education, international trips and sports on its website.

The Alternative Education: a Tale of Two Precincts

Rosewood High School has an on-campus alternative education program designed to serve a cohort of young people identified as 'disengaged' and 'at risk' of early drop-out from the school. The program aims at increasing the school attendance of these students by increasing their 'self-esteem and positive image'. The program, which focuses on building relationships and developing practical skills, is housed within a 'hut' on the school ground. The hut is a specifically designated area of about 80 m^2 equipped with a kitchen, cookware and utensils and a lunch table. As one of the program teachers explains, the hut is 'a place of belonging' allowing young people to gather, plan and work together.

Two teachers work together with students in the program: an experienced teacher who I refer to as Lucas and an artisan teacher who I call Roy. Lucas is responsible for liaising with the well-being coordinators for referrals to the program. He is also in charge of developing 'a focus plan' for each student, supervising them, evaluating their progress and reporting back to the school. The focus plan is an individualised learning plan developed conjointly by Lucas and the school well-being coordinators. Through his close collaboration with the school, Lucas is

[1]The ICSEA is an indicator developed by ACARA to enable comparisons of NAPLAN results among students in schools across Australia. ICSEA provides a scale that numerically represents the relative magnitude of factors within students' background, such as parents' occupation or education level, and school-

related factors, such as geographical location, as they bear upon the educational outcomes of young people.

aware of the specific needs and circumstances of each student. Roy, the artesian teacher, works closely with Lucas to identify and design projects within the school, organise and allocate tasks and oversee the students' work which often involves activities such as mulching and gardening, building fixtures like stairs and decks on campus and repairing school facilities.

Once a student is identified and referred to the program via the school well-being coordinators, Lucas would hold a first consultation meeting with the student to explain how the program works and ask them if they would like to join. After a student expresses their interest, Lucas would then contact their parent/s to seek permission for the referral. This, as Lucas explains, is not always an easy task given that some parents prefer to 'keep their children in the mainstream school' because they perceive the program as 'not academically rigorous'. Upon receiving parental consent, a student is then released from the mainstream school 1 day per week to attend the program. The program is flexible with attendance to allow students to return to their classroom if needed. Lengths of stay in the program also vary with some students attending for a short period of time while others staying for longer periods.

A typical day in the alternative education program starts a morning gathering in the hut. This offers an opportunity to brief students about the project/s for the day. Once briefed and allocated to specific tasks, each student would then work alongside Lucas and Roy until the morning tea break. The students would then continue with their work until early afternoon when the cohort stops for a communal lunch break which involves cooking, eating and cleaning the hut together. The lunch is followed by a roundtable talk to invite each person to reflect on their own and their peers' work during the day. As Lucas explains, spending time together is a key part of checking in with each student about their needs and well-being and aims at 'developing positive relationships' with students who are central to the program.

Performativity and Limited Frames of Recognition

Several factors both within the social geography of schools and in student backgrounds coalesce to produce exclusion for some young people (Fredricks 2014). One factor that led to exclusion for young people facing more complex circumstances was one-size-fits-all practices of care in Rosewood High School. These practices, which prioritised academic achievement and learning outcomes, were a response to the performative pressures that the school faced in meeting the core curriculum standards in literacy and numeracy measured as part of NAPLAN.

Emphasis on performance and outcomes is reflected in my interview with the school principal. In response to a question about the mission of the school, the principal talked about the importance of learning outcomes in post-school transition of students to tertiary levels. Outcome-driven priorities and prac-

tices, however, produced different impacts for young people. As Lucas commented, the pressures that teachers faced due to the school's performative priorities led them towards practices that benefit those in the middle:

Teachers feel pressured to get the results up, keep them going for *all* students. Sometimes, you can drop one or two. Now that they have bell charts presented where you're always going to have your tail end; it doesn't matter how much energy you put into that tail end. It is really hard to bring that end up on the bell chart, whereas you can move your middle over, or you can move your middle up, and you can move your top end up, but it is very hard to work with this bottom end. And sometimes, it's reflected in the attitude to students, "We don't really have time to work with these kids who struggle". That's the sad reflection of the reality of education!

Two points merit attention in above comment from Lucas. First, the comment highlights how forms of accountability tied to test-based performativities dominated the practices of teachers in Rosewood High School. As Lingard and Keddie (2013) have shown in their study of classroom pedagogies in a number of Australian schools, teaching practices that respond to outcome-driven accountabilities lack differentiation, and as such constitute 'pedagogies of indifference'. Such pedagogies presume certain needs and favour particular youth subjectivities. Pedagogies of indifference are tailored towards the dispositions of certain groups of young people, namely those who are more likely to meet the requirements of schools for performing academically and producing learning outcomes that can contribute to the ranking and public image of the institution within the education market.

The comment from Lucas also shows how the institutional arrangements and practices of Rosewood High School influenced discursive availabilities and delineated who constitutes a legitimate subject of (performative) care work within the mainstream school. In doing so, the school provided a framework of recognition for some young people while rendering others as unrecognisable subjects of performative care work. This differentiation on recognition shapes who can belong, and who cannot, is important in everyday social spaces such as schools and classrooms (Habib and Ward 2019; Harris et al. 2021; Wyn et al. 2020). Sarah, a 14 year-old student, is an example of one student who complains about the predicaments that she faces in

her classrooms as a result of inadequate, and deficit, differentiation. Sarah is from a separated family background and lives with her mother who has a disability. Sarah explains how her home situation often makes her 'feel depressed' and how school adds to her 'anxieties':

We're basically *all* treated the same. Just like it depends on the students, like if they [teachers] know they're like a *bad* student, and then they treat them different. I know why I am treated different, because I've had over 50 detentions. I've skipped mostly all of them, so that's why I am a bad student. But I've liked stopped with the detentions, like I'm acting like a *good* kid, but like my grades are just horrible

Sarah's comment highlights how the narrow parameters of recognition offered by the school were implicated in producing exclusion for those students who

faced more complex circumstances. As Sarah points out, to be recognised and treated as legitimate subjects within the framework of care in Rosewood High School, students were expected to comply with the discursively constituted norms and expectations of 'good students', namely those who could perform and produce learning outcomes. This narrowed the horizon of intelligibility for some students. For Sarah, a discrepancy between her lived experiences, i.e. her ontological stance, and the frames of identity made available to her about who she was via dominant discourses, i.e. her epistemological stance, produced what Lakämper (2017) calls a sense of affective dissonance which she expressed as resentment towards her teachers.

Sarah's response to this onto-epistemological tension led her to an ongoing cycle of conflict and compromise in order to overcome her normative categorisation as 'a bad student' and its exclusionary consequences. Sarah's responses the frames of misrecognition oscillated between acts of unsuccessful compromise to 're-do herself' as 'a good student' who performs well and achieves better marks, and a desire to interrupt and alter discursive availabilities that curb her capacities to live life as a subject worthy of recognition on her own terms as a student who faced more complex circumstances and needed additional support. This dilemma created what Thomson (2007) calls 'the paradox of visibility and invisibility'. That is, while Sarah felt visible because of the reputation that she had acquired as 'bad kid', she felt unsupported with her education. This ongoing paradox left Sarah in a state of confusion as to how she can overcome their normative categorisation and its exclusionary consequences.

Sarah was by no means an exception in this regard. Other students attending the alternative education program also engaged in a similar cycle accepting and contesting the terms of recognition offered to them via the school and its institutional practices. By highlighting how practices of Rosewood High School narrowed the horizon of intelligibility for young people with more complex needs and circumstance, I do not intend to suggest that the school had relinquished its duty of care towards these students. On the contrary, the school had taken steps to address the needs of these young people by (partially) funding the alternative education program. However, as I demonstrate and discuss in the next section of the paper, the positioning of the program as measure to bring about a dispositional change in the students concealed how the mainstream school was implicated in the practices that differentiated and divided students, and thus left intact the institutional arrangements that undermined the capacity of the young people it severed to persevere in life as recognisable subjects within the institution.

Alternative Education for Youth: Recognition of Differences and/or Reification of Discursive Availabilities?

Against the backdrop of the narrow schemes of recognition in Rosewood High School, the alternative education program offered a relational space for

young people who had tuned out and who were thus viewed as vulnerable (see Down et al. 2018; Harris et al. 2021). As the principal commented, the program targeted those who had 'the whole box and dice' by offering them a place to develop 'an important relationship with an adult'. Although the principal identified student disengagement as one of his main concerns, attributing the causes of disengagement to the absence of significant adults placed the onus squarely back on young people and their families for the predicaments that they faced within the school. This relegated the institutional arrangements and practices of Rosewood High School to an unproblematic background and instead attributed the conditions that produced risk and vulnerability to social and economic ills that were outside the jurisdiction of the school:

Often these sorts of students don't have a significant adult; their parents don't play that role, they've got their own problems; they don't go to play football on the weekend often, so they don't have a coach that they can look up to. […] We worry about them, we know they are not achieving, we don't need the NAPLAN to tell them that. And I guess some of the students in [the program] will be very skilled in terms of their literacy and numeracy, but may have mental health problems, but usually all those factors overlap. It's not always the case, but students in [the program] are for the most part I would think disengaged in the classroom, and a lot of them come from disadvantaged families, a lot of them have mental wellbeing issues. They've got the whole box and dice

As the principal comment shows, the alternative education program was viewed as an equity measure to build connections between disaffected young people and the wider school community. By operating within the premises of Rosewood High School, the program focused on creating the necessary conditions for the re-engagement with the institution and its practices. Involvement in hands-on activities within the program provided a temporary respite from the strict school schedule and its performative expectations. The often easy-to-accomplish and manual tasks which were designed to enhance students' self-esteem were part of a larger psycho-social intervention that had as its ultimate objective the 're-doing of the self' through activities that could produce a tangible and often immediate outcomes (Ågren 2021). These activities were aimed at building positive self-image among students which, as the principal put it, was not always possible to achieve in the mainstream classroom setting:

The beauty of the program is that the students are not removed from the community, there are a lot of alternative programs where students are placed outside the school. The beauty is the students are still integrated within the school community, and attending, so that they don't become disconnected. And another strength of the program is that it is hands-on, and the students are constructing things, they are improving features around the school, physical features of the school. So, they might be doing a mural or building a deck and it enhances their self-esteem, because they can see what they're doing

Deficit framing of the students and their capacities was a recurring theme in the interview with the principal. Lucas and Roy also acknowledged the tension that young people experienced between their lived and embodied experiences and the judgements about and against them in Rosewood High School.

This onto-epistemological gap created a sense of dissonance which students manifested in different forms depending on their personalities and circumstances. While some young people resorted to more confrontational strategies to express their sense of affective dissonance, others opted for more passive modes of coping such as withdrawal as they contested the normative restrictions and their deficit positioning in the institution. Paul is an example of one such student who was recently placed in the alternative education program. Lucas described Paul 'as a fairly well-behaved student with good inter-personal and intra- personal skills' who had failed to meet his 'learning potentials':

I feel really good here [in the program] because Lucas, he thinks I am a really good worker in here, and he always picks me to do all the hard jobs because he knows I can just do them. That makes me feel good about myself, because he trusts me. In here, they trust me. Out there [in the school], they don't really trust me as much

The above comment shows how the alternative education program offered a counter-episteme that resonated with and responded to young people's desire for living life as recognisable subjects. To broaden the parameters of recognition beyond a limited and limiting set of performative criteria, Lucas and Roy took the lived experiences of students outside school to develop a better understanding about what contributed to their affective responses in the school. In doing so, Lucas and Roy used empathy to orient themselves towards understanding the other and their predicaments. As the following comment from Roy shows, empathy was deemed a productive basis for overcoming inter-subjective breakdown and building reciprocity within the intensely relational setting of the alternative education program:

We ask, we care, we are interested in what they're doing whereas in the classroom, the teacher runs in right on the bell, and wants them all to sit down, be quiet and get on with their work where, you know, there is no personal interaction really as much… I would assume! […] I can see they're down or whatever. I'm like stop and ask them what's going on, and then just randomly I'll ask about, you know, your dad or something, and then they open up this huge story, you know! And you think, you know, no wonder they're mixed-up kids. Some of the stories you hear, they're huge! […] They are all troubled, in one way or another. Some of them are a bit *troublesome*, but I think that still stems back from being *troubled*!

Roy's comment highlights a well-recognised tension in the treatment of those who are placed outside the horizon of intelligibility and are, therefore, identified as different. The legal scholar, Martha Minow (1990, p. 20), talks about this tension using the phrase 'the dilemma of difference'. The challenge that such a dilemma presents is one of the acknowledging difference/s while avoiding essentialisation and subsequent stigmatisation. Dealing adequately with the dilemma of difference requires critical attention to how differences come to exist and what social, economic and ideological forces give meaning to the very centre from which differences emerge. The implications of the difference dilemma can be profound for those who are constructed as different as their

categorisation can become a basis for their exclusion from various social, economic, educational, cultural and political spheres of life.

The dilemma of difference was manifested in the working of the alternative education program through what Mathieu (2019) calls a process of 'separation and reification'. Separation takes place through binary classification to develop a better understanding about the lived experiences of the subject. By separating the student subject for closer scrutiny worthy of recognition, the alternative education program aimed to create the conditions conducive for engagement with them, and in so doing responded to the neglect of their circumstances within the mainstream school. Reification followed when those young people identified as different were reduced to their attributes and to what differentiated them from 'the unstated norm' in the institution. Reification is evident in Roy's use of 'bounded vocabulary' (Minow 1990) referring to students as 'troubled', 'troubling', 'troublesome' and 'mixed-up', and in Lucas' comment about the students in the program as 'not particularly academically gifted'.

I do not intend to suggest that differences do not exist or that they should not be identified, but to recognise how school practices made certain differences seem salient, 'not because of a trait intrinsic to the person but because the dominant institutional arrangements were designed without that trait in mind – designed according to an unstated norm' (Minow 1990, p. 70). Taking the practices that give meaning to differences as a neutral background, the program's efforts to reconnect the students to the 'normal' business of Rosewood High School were destined to fail as they were predicated on the dissolution of the subjects' identity as a pre-condition for their re-engagement. This helps explain why many young people found themselves in a vicious cycle of referrals between the alternative education program and the school. Some students stayed in the program for prolonged periods, and those who left only found themselves referred back to it charged with the task of re-doing themselves within and against the school's schemes of recognition that rendered them as unviable subjects.

Affective Solidary and the Quest for Genuine Re-engagement

In this latter section of the paper, I advance my discussions so far to outline ways in which alternative education programs of the sort described in this paper can contribute to more effective and genuine re-engagement opportunities for the so-called vulnerable young people. Following Hemmings (2012), I draw on scholarship about the 'impossibility of representation' and the limits of empathy as a way of understanding and connecting with the marginalised other to suggest two possibilities through which alternative education can be part of a broader politics of transformation within the wider framework of education. This requires (1) harnessing the disruptive qualities of a sense of affective dissonance to speak back to the mainstream school about their implications in the production of risk and vulnerability, and (2) fostering a sense of affective solidarity driven by shared experiences of discomfort with norma-

tive restrictions that affect all of us, albeit in different forms and to varying degrees.

Exposing how mainstream school practices and arrangements are implicated in the production of risk and vulnerability requires the capacity and a willingness to listen to young people's voices about their lived experiences of exclusion and othering in schools. This is the first step in developing detailed and situated insights into what it means to live life as a subject on the margins without assuming a position of shared identity or a desire to transcend our differences towards a universal condition. As Hemmings (2012) maintains, '[m]arginal subjects produce different, more reliable, knowledge because of conditions of inequality that mean they (have to) know dominant frames of legitimation in order to survive or thrive, and generate local knowledges for the same reason'. In fact, seeking diagnosis of the problem from the mainstream school presents their institutional practices as an unproblematic background, and in so doing leaves intact the very centre that gives meaning to and is implicated in the production of differences, risk and vulnerability for some young people.

Drawing on the marginalised subjects' local knowledge and lived experiences within and against frames of legitimation in schools also helps avoid essentialisation and judgements which are often associated with the practices of alternative education programs that prioritise empathising with the other as a way of understanding the predicaments that they face in life. A transformative politics, instead, recognises that our very own positioning within the grids of social-relational power makes knowing, representing and speaking for the other impossible (Probyn 1993; Spivak 1988). Rather than assuming a level-playing field in inter-subjective encounters based on a presumed 'shared humanity' (Kukar 2016), a politics of transformation taps into the power of affects such as resentment, rage and apathy to expose what transpires in inter-subject encounters that can lead to discomfort for some young people within the social and relational geography of mainstream school and classrooms.

Acknowledging affective dissonance per se does not constitute an adequate basis for transformation. A sense of affective dissonance can only lead to a politicised drive for change insofar it is used to foster affective solidarity. As Hemmings (2012, p. 158) maintains, affective solidary offers platform 'from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds'. A focus on building affective solidarity helps address the limits of universal approaches that claim to care for the marginalised other by empathising with them while remaining oblivious to the ways in which one can be implicated in the predicaments of the other. Affective solidarity makes an inroad into transformative politics by deriving the impetus for change not from a desire to know the other or empathise with their suffering, but from our own feeling of discomfort in inter-subjective relations 'without generalising these as shared by all subjects or as the basis of transcendence of difference' (Hemmings 2012, p. 158).

By tapping into the disruptive qualities of affects, alternative education programs can contribute to a re-reading of the inter-subjective relations and

frameworks of legitimation that operate within mainstream schools. Such a critical-reflexive stance creates opportunities for exposing how institutional priorities in schools driven by ethos of performativity, achievement and outcomes can be implicated in the production of risk and vulnerability for some young people. A critically reflexive stance that speaks back to mainstream from the margins shifts the focus from giving marginal subjects 'a second chance' for changing and adapting to exposing the normative restrictions and the structures of power associated with them that curb recognisability and produce disconnection in the first place. This can then help provide a politicised impetus for altering discursive availabilities that limit recognisability based on shared experiences of discomfort with normative restriction and our very own feeling of being and living in the world and the world's judgements about/against us.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how alternative education programs that aim to reconnect the so-called vulnerable youth to mainstream schools can reinscribe problematic frames of identity, and in doing so disfavour those who they intend to serve. By relegating the act of becoming intelligible to the remit of young people's responsibility, alternative education can charge the excluded other with the task of re-doing themselves within and against the dominant schemes of misrecognition that rendered them unrecognisable subjects within the institution in the first place. I also discussed how a tendency to empathise with those who have been rendered unrecognisable subjects misses the opportunity to capitalise on the disruptive qualities of their affective responses to build a sense of solidarity driven by a desire to alter discursive availabilities in mainstreams schools. By providing the opportunity to bear witness to and critically reflect on the harms inflicted on us in our own encounters with the other in life, alternative education program can contribute to a politicised impetus for change on the basis of making visible our own implication in the suffering of the other.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate This research involves human participants. Ethics approvals were obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC: 1442151) at the University of Melbourne, as well as the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2014_002419). Informed Consent The participants were informed about the aims and requirements of the research using Plain Language Statements (PLSs). The PLSs delineated in easily comprehensible language: (a) the procedures and possible risks associated with the study, (b) a statement that participation was voluntary, and that non-participation did not have any implications for them, (c) explanation of the participants' right to withdraw from the study at any point in time and (d) statements about confidentiality procedures and the use of the data. Different versions of the PLSs were developed for each group of participants.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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