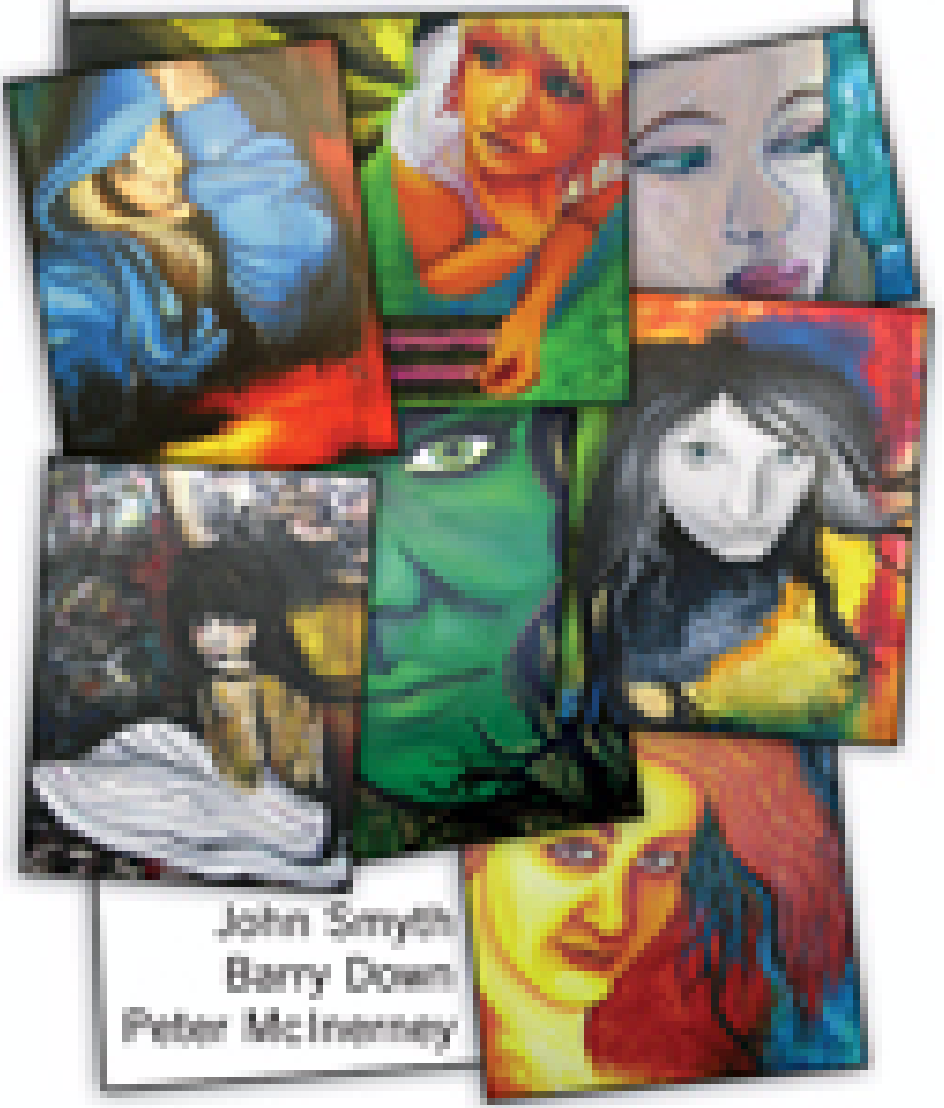
'Hanging in with Kids' IN TOUGH TIMES

Engagement in Contexts of Educational Disadvantage in the Relational School



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1. *Framing the Book, Its Context and Contents*

What this book is about and why it is distinctive

Young people of school age in affluent western countries, particularly those from non-traditional, adverse and challenging backgrounds, are disengaging, tuning out, and switching off schooling at alarming and unprecedented rates. Official statistics show that between 30–40 per cent of young people are making the active choice not to complete high school or secondary education, with figures dramatically higher in some local settings. This is testimony to the fact that there is something seriously awry. The most common explanations provided tend to be around individual and largely pathologizing explanations—the irrelevance of school, uninspiring pedagogy, difficulties with peers, problems around identity formation, and conflicts with school cultures and policies. We argue that these are diminished and partial explanations that in the end constitute a victim-blaming approach. This issue is also frequently given even more dramatic traction through unsympathetic media that delight in talking up at whatever opportunity the moral panic around young people.

This issue is not only a problem for the young people themselves, in terms of diminished lives and futures foreclosed, but it is a problem as well in terms of the social and economic fabric of democratic societies that can ill-afford such loss and suffering. The policy response of governments, with the few exceptions of Scandinavian countries, has largely missed the point and has been inappropriate—muscular, managerialist, punitive, hortative, and largely non-inclusive of the people who are most affected, namely, marginalized young people from backgrounds that have in many instances been blighted due to the effects of de-industrialization and globalization.

Against this kind of contextual background, this is a book that is radically suited to the times.

It starts from a very different place to most analyses and policy responses to this issue. It examines young people's disengagement from schooling from the viewpoint of the lives, experiences, interests, aspirations and communities from which young people come and within which they are embedded. The way we do this in the book is through the use of narratives and portraits—a representational approach we have used extensively in our research for more than two decades as a way of providing detailed insights into the lives and wider contexts of our research informants.

In this book we do not shy away from having a perspective, nor are we at all reluctant to get up close to young lives that have been deeply scarred as a consequence of the disjuncture between the middle class institution of schooling, the way in which it has been severely compromised by the politics of greed and the rapaciousness of advanced capitalism, and the increasingly tenuous lives of people increasingly forced to the margins.

The book is also distinctive in the intellectual and practical way it provides a circuit-breaker with which to unpolarize a policy process that has become caught up in demonizing young people from non-middle class backgrounds, treating them in inappropriate pedagogical ways, and that ends up further alienating and disenfranchising them.

We need to explain something about our choice of the action verb *doing* that is a pre-fix to chapters 4 through 7 in the book. In a illuminating ethnography of how schools 'work on' the lives of young people, Pope (2001) reveals how schools severely compromise young people in the way they present them with an inauthentic set of values around 'getting ahead', 'manipulation', scheming', 'cheating' and 'materialism'. The end result, not surprisingly, is that young people 'do school'—which is to say, they play the game but don't deeply engage with learning nor do they by and large commit to altruistic values like integrity and community. This is a reflection of the way schools are being framed up by the larger political and policy contexts around accountability, transparency, high stakes testing, standards, and the grade-performance exchange culture that ensues. This is not so much a personal indictment of young people, nor is it a castigation of the predisposition of the culture of schools, so much as a reflection of the wider paradigm we have allowed to infect our lives. There is a sense in Pope's work that 'doing' school constitutes a process in which young people are caught up in a ritual of going through the motions and responding in a way that is consistent with the inauthentic agenda on offer.

Our take on 'doing' has a somewhat different, less deterministic, and more activist connotation. We take it to mean a process of speaking back to dominant perspectives, and in that not simply critiquing them but offering grounded and well-articulated alternatives. To invoke Lund and Carr (2008), who draw from the work of Barber (1984), the notion of 'doing' as we are using

it has a *thick* rather than a *thin* meaning. For them, the thin meaning of democracy is around exercising a vote, whereas a thick interpretation involves asking critical questions, challenging entrenched views, and constructing more engaged and engaging alternatives (see Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009 for further elaboration).

The overwhelming emphasis in this book is upon what we argue to be a process of courageously naming the impediments (poverty and class), bringing into central focus the essence of schools (relational power around issues of pedagogy), having an expansive boundary-crossing mindset (school-community engagement) and bringing all of these into concerted conversation with a meaningful and engaging curriculum (corporate/popular culture within a socially critical view of vocational and work education) that is up to the task of bringing about transformational change.

The book, therefore, constructs a very different architecture from within which to formulate public policy and the practices that flow from it, in educational contexts of socio-economic disadvantage. The book endorses a set of conditions for 'good policy' around: affirming local agency; developing socially just approaches to schooling; place-based and community-embedded forms of learning; literacies that are critical and culturally attentive; and above all, authentic forms of assessment that are appreciative of educational performance and progress.

We believe the issues associated with young people from the most adverse backgrounds, 'hanging in' with school, will remain on the international radar for quite some time. Given the rapidity with which the tectonic plates of capitalism are moving around unpredictably at the moment, and with no signs of that abating any time soon, the gradient of economic and social disadvantage in affluent countries can only be expected to substantially worsen before it shows any signs of improving. In all likelihood, more and more young people in schools will come from challenging backgrounds, and schools, communities and the public policy process will need to be much more significantly attuned along the empirical, discursive and activist lines discussed in this book.

What is the organizing motif of the book?

The recurring theme of this book is that schools operating most effectively in the most disadvantaging contexts are fundamentally committed to issues that suture together "relational power." That is to say, they regard structures, governance, resourcing issues, organization, management and leadership as being important but only to the extent that they contribute to the valued social end of improving the life chances of the least advantaged.

The fundamental point, totally absent from the neo-liberal human capital view of schooling, is that relationships are of paramount importance—between young people and adults, between schools and communities, among young people themselves, and most importantly, connectedness to the big ideas that define their lives and the wider world they live it. When these connections are missing, damaged, or never established, then young lives suffer dramatically as a consequence.

This is, then, a book that highlights some big themes:

- the importance of investing in relational power
- the crucial need for student and community voice
- engaging with 'poverty of opportunity' in disadvantaged schools, and
- conceiving of schools as places committed to being critically reflective of themselves and the wider society of which they are apart.

We believe that our choice of title is prescient. We have titled it *Hanging in with Kids in Tough Times* because: (a) of the crucial need for imaginative ways in which to re-engage (or re-enchant?) disengaged young people with learning despite the difficulties, impediments and obstacles—in other words, the sense of needing to 'go the extra yards'; (b) this kind of language reflects the street level vernacular that young people themselves, along with their teachers, often use to cut though complex issues to get to the nub of the matter; and (c) it conveys, albeit in coded form, something about the importance of the harsh contextual conditions that operate to shape lives, and in turn speak back to those conditions.

A critical policy ethnography

We position the approach we adopt in this book as being within the camp of critical policy ethnography. That is to say, we are interested in analyzing the disputed and contested policy and practice space around young people and communities 'put at a disadvantage'. This is an area that is replete with opinions, solutions, programs and packages on how to 'fix the problem'—most of which while well-meaning, are under-informed and wide of the mark, especially in the way they fail to take account of the views of young people, their views of schooling, or the histories and the cultures of the communities in which they live.

We do not so much take a specific policy as the object of our focus here, but rather concern ourselves with a broad social and educational policy arena as it is being enacted, rolled out, experienced and re-worked through the lives of a particular category of young people. The policy agenda or arena that is receiving unprecedented attention at the moment, we would argue for the

wrong set of reasons, is the issue of educational engagement and disengagement of young people in contexts of disadvantage.

The kind of questions animating us and that have drawn us into this area in the first place are questions like:

- how are disadvantaged young people that are deemed to be disengaged envisaged by the policy process?
- who forms these views, how have such views come to be, and what is holding them in place?
- whose interests are advanced by continuing to present the prevailing view of educational disengagement, and whose are excluded?
- are the policy responses to educational disengagement ones that foreground the lives and interests of young people themselves, or is there some other agenda at work?
- what might an approach look like that attempts to listen deeply, seeks to be inclusive, and that responds appropriately to what is going on?
- what is the basis for a more courageous approach to educational (re)engagement that stands up to and contests dominant perspectives?

While the area of policy ethnography (or policy sociology or policy scholarship, as it also known) is still an emerging field, and far from well defined, it is possible to point to some distinctive features even if there is not a well-articulated methodology. Ball & Bowe (1990) come closest to a working explanation, when they put it like this:

> For policy ethnography the concern needs to be both with exploring policy making, in terms of the processes of value dispute and material influence which underlie and invest the formation of policy discourses, as well as portraying and analyzing the processes of active interpretation and meaning-making which relate policy texts to practice. In part at least this also involves the identification of resistance, accommodation, subterfuge and conformity within and between arenas of practice. It involves the plotting of clashes and mismatches between contending discourses at work in these arenas, e.g. professionalism vs conformity, autonomy vs constraint, specification vs latitude, the political vs the educational. Policy ethnography should rest on the recognition of a clear distinction between intended and actual policy-in-use, and will attend carefully to processes of mediation and recontextualization. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge that policy intentions may contain ambiguities, contradictions and omissions that provide particular opportunities for parties to the 'implementation' process, what we might term 'space' for maneuver (p. 4).

In Levinson and Sutton's (2001) words, what we are attempting to do is 'to reconstruct the cultural logic, the embedded meaning, of discourses, institutions, and actions' (p. 4) around the issue of disengagement of young people

from school. Viewed in this way, far from policy being uni-dimensional, linear, 'top down', 'generated' by one group, and 'implemented' or 'done to' yet another group of individuals and contexts, policy is seen as a multi-faceted process of settlements that come about as a result of contestation, appropriation, accommodation, compromise and adaptation, as well as resistance. Envisaged thus, policy becomes provisional and contingent, a 'socio-cultural activity' (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p. 3) occurring in and across various social contexts. Regarding policy as a socio-cultural practice, means attending to '…the frameworks of cultural meaning people use to interpret their experience and generate social behavior' (Levinson & Sutton, 2001, p. 3). The approach of critical policy ethnography enables us to access the ways in which people make sense of how they are controlled and regulated, as well as how they accommodate or resist the power of regulatory structures.

Levinson and Cade (2002) allude to the most admirable features of critical policy ethnography as comprising:

- developing a capacity to question 'taken-for-granted' (p. xiii) categories that otherwise are allowed to go unchallenged;
- advancing a progressive agenda even when conducted in 'compressed' timeframes (Walford, 2002);
- involving participants as active 'subverters' (Batallan, 2002) of contradictory policy texts;
- encouraging 'perspective taking' (Demerath, 2002) through an 'ethnographic sensibility' that implicates researchers as policy advocates with/for participants; and
- finally, 'see[ing] and think[ing] ethnographically' enables a revelation of the connection between 'good intentions' and 'faulty assumptions' (Levinson & Cade, 2002, p. xviii).

A critical policy analysis reading of student (dis)engagement goes something like this.

Providing 'solutions' to complex social issues has become a huge and profitable industry, and it works in a two stage way. First, a deviant category is constructed that does not fit arbitrarily determined social norms. In the case of public schools, this is not difficult to do because of the increasing diversity and complexity of young people presenting in schools, with traits that are considerably at variance with middle class ways—untidiness, literacy difficulties, slackness around homework, an absence of respect for authority, and attributes displaying an aversion to punctuality, courtesy, motivation, assiduousness, a failure to attach value to education, and the absence of a general desire to 'get ahead' or make something of oneself. Given the press within the broader neoliberal project to marketize and homogenize schools, to make them attractive places for parental choice, it is not altogether surprising to find

increasing numbers of the least attractive young people being marginalized, made to feel most unwelcome, and in the end being 'eased' or propelled out of school.

Once the least attractive and conforming have become constructed as 'other', and possibly even having been induced into becoming complicit in making the active choice that schooling is not for them, then the second stage is the bringing into existence of alternative, targeted, or re-entry programs and pathways to re-engage and rehabilitate them back into the middle class or mainstream ways they have deviated from. Well-meaning though these programs are, and done with the best of intentions to give marginalized young people a 'second chance', what gets overlooked here is the massive contradiction—the system that is showing such benevolence in 'fixing them up' (albeit with a modicum of self interest around the public moral panic about young people being out of control), is exactly the same system that expelled or exiled them in the first place. To put it bluntly, the contradiction is simply mind-boggling!

What is the research background to the book?

Empirical research informing this book involved a multi-sited ethnography of a cluster of senior secondary schools in a regional part of Australia. With student numbers ranging from 800 to 1000, the four government (public) schools offered a comprehensive curriculum for students in years 8 to 12. Notwithstanding the prosperity generated by manufacturing, mining and tourism, the region was characterized by high levels of unemployment and welfare dependency. With the cooperation of regional education authorities and the municipal council, we set out to have a dialogue with schools about the conditions that promote school retention and student engagement in a context of educational disadvantage. We spent two weeks in each school and conducted 71 formal interviews (individual and group) varying in length from 30 to 90 minutes and amounting to 50 hours overall. Those interviewed included a regional director of education, 4 principals, 7 deputy / assistant principals, 16 managers / heads of departments, 22 teachers, a school psychologist, 5 parents, 15 students, and an industry manager. The research also involved conducted tours of the schools and community projects, informal conversations with staff, 12 hours of participant observation of classroom teaching, staff / faculty / leadership team meetings, school assemblies, and a parent information evening. Field notes and transcripts were supplemented with a photographic record of our time in the schools and information obtained from school newsletters, curriculum documents and school plans.

A synoptic view of the contents

Making inroads into protracted issues of under-participation in education for

the most marginalized involves developing a unique set of relationships not only with young people but also with the communities they come from. The chapters scaffold this theme as follows.

Chapter 2: Poverty, Education and Class

It is rather unfashionable to talk about poverty in affluent western countries. We are all supposed to have shared in the benefits of the 'trickle down' effects of neo-liberal policies of globalization, de-regulation and free trade. Sadly, this theory has not delivered for sizeable groups within our societies. In many cases what we have are very unequal societies in which educational disadvantage remains a blight on our social and economic landscape. This chapter takes a critical look at contemporary understandings of poverty, class and inequality and considers how educational policy and practice needs to be re-aligned in schools and education systems to ensure a more inclusive and equitable education for all students, not just the privileged few. We make particular reference to the meaning of poverty in the Australian context of our study. There is detailed discussion of the relationship between education and social class and of the unhelpful intrusion of Ruby Payne and her 'culture of poverty' approach into what is an extremely complex set of connections. While not denying the existence of class differences, this chapter analyses how such differences translate into schools, and how communities put at a disadvantage might 'speak back' in what we refer to as a 'critical parental involvement' approach.

Chapter 3: Relationships, Power and Pedagogy

Whether or not young people in the most difficult circumstances 'hang in' with school, depends greatly on the quality of their relationships with their peers, adult educators, and the ideas they are required to relate to. This chapter highlights the ways in which teachers and schools can enhance the educational engagement of the most marginalized and disenfranchised young people by placing relationships and issues of power at the centre of the curriculum, and by negotiating learning in ways that are relevant, valuable and respectful of young lives and the circumstances in which they are lived. We argue that it is the preparedness to invest in relational power and as a consequence to produce a 'relational school', as distinct from the currently dominant 'managerial' or 'accountable' school, that holds the greatest promise of making the most profound difference in contexts of disadvantage.

Chapter 4: Doing Community Voice

Schools are social organizations embedded in communities. How well they function as learning institutions is highly contingent on the active consent and

support of parents, students and the diverse groups that make up the school and community. Unfortunately, a culture of managerialism and the hierarchical structures in high schools tend to inhibit school–community dialogue and are especially alienating for the most marginalized students and their parents. In this chapter we explore ways in which participatory and community oriented approaches to schooling can lead to improved student engagement and contribute to the development of communities. From our perspective, 'doing community voice' involves developing pedagogies and organizational structures that (a) nurture an ethos of community framed around a commitment to democratic practices, social justice and the welfare of all students (b) build curriculum and learning opportunities around the experiences, interests and aspirations of students and their communities, and (c) reposition schools as vehicles for community capacity building.

Chapter 5: Doing Identity Formation

Young people today are absorbed in a world of TV, music, video games, comic books, the Internet and other aspects of corporate/popular culture—all of which exert a powerful influence on young lives, identities, needs and desires. This chapter takes a critical look at the growing social power of corporate/popular culture and examines the pedagogical implications for schools. In particular, it highlights the ways in which public pedagogy shapes young people as consumer-citizens and considers how enterprising and creative teachers can develop a critical awareness of the impact of mass media and consumer culture on young peoples' lives and experiences. To this end, the chapter will explore ways of demystifying corporate/popular culture especially as it relates to the commercialization of childhood and the production of consumer-citizens; putting identity formation on the educational agenda by overcoming resistances and challenging deficit identities; and creating a humanizing pedagogy which is focused on engaging young people in liberating pedagogies.

Chapter 6: Doing Critical Work Education

Vocational education and training are sometimes presented as a panacea for improving levels of student engagement in learning as well as the life chances of working class students. However, an overemphasis on vocational education and training can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and a highly stratified education system that can work against the interests of the most marginalized students. This chapter explores some of the key contradictions and tensions of vocationalization in disadvantaged schools and considers the benefits of engaging young people in a socially critical approach to work education. Against the backdrop of the current global economic crisis, this chapter is

organized around three themes, namely, problematizing new vocationalism; investigating the changing nature of work and what it means to be engaged in good work; and rebuilding work education programs by breaking down the artificial divide between manual and mental labor, rethinking school-industry partnerships, valuing teacher knowledge and critical reflection, and nurturing civic engagement, democracy and justice.

Chapter 7: Doing Policy Differently

One of the dilemmas confronting educators revolves around the question: how can schools engage in productive ways with external education policies, whilst sustaining their own knowledge of what really works for students in their own community? This chapter deals with the public policy context of schooling and the global, national and local factors that impact on teachers' work and schooling. It explores the opportunities and constraints at the interface between policy and practice and shows how teachers have been able to develop authentic school-based responses to issues of student engagement in disadvantaged communities. In making an argument for 'doing policy differently', we show how schools and teachers can assert a degree of agency in resisting the most regressive aspects of mandated policies whilst developing far more relevant and engaging pedagogies for young people through middle school practices, place-based learning, cultural studies and alternative assessment and reporting methods. Taking account of the limitations of localized responses to educational inequalities, we outline the features of a policy agenda based on an activist and socially critical approach to school and community renewal. The chapter concludes with a set of principles and values to guide the development of 'good' policy and practice in schools.

Chapter 8: Reinventing the High School: New Scripts, Fragments and Possibilities

Tackling complex matters of the kind raised in this book requires an approach as radical as literally recasting or reinventing the social institution of the high school. This will entail devising new scripts, working with amenable fragments, while having high hopes about more humane possibilities. It will also of necessity require significant levels of dialogue between teachers, students, parents, communities and government. In this chapter we bring together—tentatively and heuristically—a set of emergent ideas, not as another 'how to do list', but as catalyst for further critique, conversation and investigation. We have identified four orienting themes, each with a series of elements, that comprise the 'relational school':

Relationships: respect, trust, care
Organization: flexible, student focused, supportive

Pedagogy: connectedness, challenging, rigorous, fun
Community: inclusiveness and valued resource

We arrive at the notion of the relational school though a concerted empirical study and theoretical analysis in an Australian context, but in a way that we think is illustrative and exemplary of the wider international nature of the issues. In this book, as in our others, while we believe the relational school is where many progressive schools are at, there is still a strong sense that there is some substantial unfinished business around the 'critically engaged' school (Smyth, Angus, Down, & McInerney, 2008)

Throughout this book, we take the position as researchers and authors that we do not hold a 'disinterested' position on the question of educational disadvantage and school reform. We share the dismay expressed by many parents, educators and community leaders about the residualization of public schooling in advanced western democracies, the under-funding of higher education and the enormous barriers to school success confronting students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We hold to the view that education is a public good and not merely an individual entitlement, and that schools should be guided by higher principles other than the preservation of the status quo. To this end, education should not simply act as a servant to the economy but should assist young people to make sense of their lives and identities and contribute to the creation of fairer and more socially just societies.