



‘HANGING IN WITH KIDS’ IN TOUGH TIMES

Engagement in contexts of educational disadvantage
in the relational school

*There’s no secret recipe for improving school participation and success for young adolescents, but recent Australian research shows it can be done, when teachers, parents, education administrators and community leaders get together to provide more inclusive and socially just schooling practices. **JOHN SMYTH, BARRY DOWN** and **PETER McINERNEY** share some key ideas from their new book.*

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 and 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 tend to be individual and largely pathologising – 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.

The victim-blaming explanation is also frequently given traction by an unsympathetic media that delights in talking up at whatever opportunity a moral panic about young people.

This issue is not only a problem for the young people themselves, in terms of diminished lives and futures foreclosed, but also 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, have largely missed the point and have been inappropriate – muscular, managerialist, punitive and largely non-inclusive of the people who are most affected, namely, marginalised young people from backgrounds that have in many instances been blighted due to the effects of de-industrialisation and globalisation.

Against this kind of contextual background, our book *'Hanging in with kids' in Tough Times*, 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 forced to the margins.

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

'Hanging in with kids' in Tough Times constructs an architecture from within which to formulate public policy and the practices that flow from it, in educational contexts of socioeconomic 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

speed with which the tectonic plates of capitalism are moving unpredictably at the moment, and with no signs of that abating any time soon, 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.

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, organisation, 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, in the connectedness to the big ideas that define their lives and the wider world they live in. When these relationships are missing,

damaged, or never established, 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 a part.

We've called the book *'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; (b) this kind of language reflects the street level vernacular that young people themselves, along with their teachers, often use to cut through 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.

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

- How are 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 engagement that stands up to and contests dominant perspectives?

Empirical research informing this book involved a cluster of four senior secondary schools in a regional part of Australia. With student numbers ranging from 800 to 1,000, the four government schools offered a comprehensive curriculum for students in Years 8 to 12. Notwithstanding the prosperity generated by manufacturing, mining and tourism, the region was characterised 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, four principals, seven deputy or assistant

principals, 16 managers or heads of departments, 22 teachers, a school psychologist, five parents, 15 students, and an industry manager. The research also involved tours of the schools and community projects, informal conversations with staff, and 12 hours of participant observation of classroom teaching, staff, faculty and 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.

Making inroads into protracted issues of under-participation in education for the most marginalised 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.



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MEANINGFUL LEARNING IS ONLY POSSIBLE WITH THE ACTIVE CONSENT AND SUPPORT OF PARENTS, STUDENTS AND THE MANY DIVERSE GROUPS THAT MAKE UP THE SCHOOL AND LOCAL COMMUNITY.

Poverty, education and class

It is rather unfashionable in some quarters 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 globalisation, deregulation 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.

Our chapter on poverty, education and class 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. In particular, it looks at the manifest inadequacies of the currently popular 'culture of poverty' view.

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.

Our chapter on relationships, power and pedagogy highlights the ways in which teachers and schools can enhance the educational engagement of the most marginalised 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.

Doing community voice

Schools are social organisations that are embedded in communities. Meaningful learning is only possible with the active consent and support of parents, students and the many diverse groups that make up the school and local community.

Our chapter on community voice explores the ways in which robust forms of school/community engagement can strengthen social bonds and contribute to improved educational engagement of young people 'put at a disadvantage.' Special significance is attached to place-based learning, civic education and the ways in which schools can work with the community and for the good of the community.

Doing identity formation

Young people today are absorbed in a world of television, music, video games, comic books, the internet and other aspects of popular culture – all of which can be a rich source of ideas for a pedagogy that connects directly to young peoples' lives.

Our chapter on identity formation outlines the ways in which enterprising and creative teachers incorporate aspects of youth and popular culture into

their lessons both as a means of engaging students and a way of developing a critical awareness of the impact of mass media and consumer culture on their lives.

Doing socially critical work

Vocational education is sometimes presented as a panacea for improving student engagement. 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 marginalised students. How can schools integrate academic, vocational and experiential learning in a way that maintains student pathways and high levels of engagement?

Our chapter on socially critical work explores the possibilities and tensions associated with studies that are about vocational education and training, and examines how schools might develop a more critical approach to workplace learning.

Doing policy differently

The crucial question for public policy is: how can schools engage in productive ways with external education policies, while sustaining their own knowledge of what really works for students in their own community?

Our chapter on the public policy context of schooling looks at the global, national and local factors that impact on teachers' work and schooling. It explores some of the opportunities and constraints at the interface

between policy and practice, and describes how teachers have been able to develop authentic school-based responses to issues of student engagement in disadvantaged communities.

A profile of conditions supporting student engagement in contexts of disadvantage

Tackling complex matters of the kind raised in our book requires significant levels of dialogue between teachers, students, parents, communities and government. Our final chapter attempts to bring together – tentatively and heuristically – a schema of emergent ideas, not as another 'how to do list,' but as catalyst for further critique, conversation and investigation. *'Hanging in with kids'* reaches deeply into the matters outlined above through an empirical study and theoretical analysis in an Australian context, while presenting it in a way that is illustrative and exemplary of the wider international nature of the issues.

Throughout, we make it clear 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 residualisation of public schooling in advanced western democracies, the underfunding 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.

'Hanging in with kids' in *Tough Times: Engagement in contexts of educational disadvantage in the relational school* by John Smyth, Barry Down and Peter McInerney is published by Peter Lang, New York. The research reported here was supported by the Australian Research Council and the Western Australian Department of Education.

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Image from the cover of 'Hanging in with kids' in *Tough Times* by Tiffany Clitheroe, Safety Bay Senior Secondary High School, Western Australia.