

Engaging Gen Y in schooling: the need for an egalitarian ethos of education

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Abstract

Narratives of power that purport to represent the ‘truth’ of others need to be challenged by the individual stories of those who are silenced by ‘authority’ and ‘expert’ opinion. This paper utilizes research data from an open-ended ethnographic study of thirty-two Australian high school students at the turn of the 21st Century. In its entirety, this research explored a range of issues in respect to contemporary youth, including globalisation, technological change and identity formation. In this paper, I present a selection of that data to invite reflection upon the notion that in order to encourage the intellectual growth and engagement of many youth whose sensibilities and behaviour have been shaped by a postmodern milieu, educators need to review the student/teacher binary and work to establish more egalitarian relationships.

Key words: school reform; student voice; ethnography; poststructuralist theory; postcolonialism.

Introduction

In western societies, the teenagers of the new millennium (‘Generation Y’) have grown up in a world of rapid communication and exposure to the diversity and difference of many peoples and places that may be accessed at the push of a button. Change is the subtext of the 21st century. It is a free market neoliberal landscape in which the drift to contract work and constant re-skilling has impacted upon expectations of a lifelong, secure career. In such contexts, the traditional schooling discourses of ‘hard work’ and ‘obedience’ may have little resonance with many young people who struggle to find personally valid connections between their lives inside and outside the school gates. Subsequent disengagement from schooling potentially leads to conflict with teaching authorities. Thus, in the press, moral panics (Cohen 1972) concerning the apparently escalating misbehaviour and violence of some young people in schools usually garner a lot of public interest. Such reports are often couched in discourses of individual deficit and deviant and/or pathological behaviour.

They ignore the challenges that a globalising, postmodern context poses to young people as they attempt to negotiate their lives. Making generalized statements about 'youth' has contributed to their subordination and 'problematization' by educators and other social service and health professionals. Rather than situating the youth experience within a broader spectrum of social and cultural change, the task becomes one of containment and control of young people. Within these processes, the voices of youth remain silent, the perspectives of young people stay marginalised.

However, during the past few decades postcolonial writers (see for example, Bhabha, 1994; Gilroy, 1992; Hall 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) have asserted the right of individual self-narrative for the marginalised thereby releasing them from the confines of simply being *other* – the *negative* side of the coloniser. According to current theory, traditional mores and boundaries are being challenged by choice, fluidity and hybridity (Lyotard 1984; Harvey 1989; Hall 1996a; Tomlinson 1999; Dolby and Rizvi 2008; Lechner and Boli 2008). This context has also been defined as 'multiphrenia' – a term used by psychologists to describe the condition of the contemporary interconnected-individual:

... a member of many communities and networks, a participant in many discourses, an audience to messages from everybody and everywhere – messages that present conflicting ideals and norms and images of the world (Gergen 1996, 9).

Logically, if many young people are being socially and culturally positioned to question notions of truth and determine their own values *outside* the school, there are likely to be consequences for the conduct of business *within* the school. It was in this volatile terrain that I sought the perspectives and life-stories of my student participants. In all, there were twenty-one girls and eleven boys ranging in age from fifteen to seventeen years. In its entirety, my research project explored a range of socio-cultural and technological transformations currently reshaping contemporary experiences of youth (see Epstein 1998; Quijada 2008; White and Wyn, 2008).

However, it is important to note that for purposes of this paper I do not seek (nor would it be possible) to present all of the conclusions and data derived from this much larger research project. The main issue framing the following discussion is the efficacy of, and need for, egalitarian teaching relationships within the context of globalising, postmodern contexts. This was just one of the sub-themes to emerge from the original project. My argument, here, is that, to the detriment of student engagement and learning, traditional top-down power structures within schools are at odds with the worlds of many contemporary western youth. This world has been aptly described as:

A world with few secure psychological, economic or intellectual markers (in which) young people ... wander within and between multiple borders and spaces marked by excess, otherness and difference. This is a world in which old certainties are ruptured and meaning becomes more contingent, less indebted to the dictates of established truth. (Giroux 1994, 287-8).

Certainly, at my research site, this was the case. Despite a façade of student consultation, students had little real power to influence the nature and direction of their learning. However, during the course of my study, some disengaged students who were failing the official curriculum began to produce work of high intellectual quality whilst others gained a renewed enthusiasm for learning. The research project thus served as a catalyst for less formal and more egalitarian relationships between me and my students. At the conclusion of my two years with them, I believe that these changes had had a significant impact upon their engagement with learning.

The paper proceeds through two main sections. First, I contextualise the research and describe my efforts to disrupt the teacher/student binary in order to facilitate relationships of openness, mutual respect and trust. Egalitarian relationships rest upon the assumption that each individual has a right to be heard and respected regardless of age and status. Obviously I had a duty of care towards my students that framed these relationships but that did not impact upon the intellectual freedoms and

explorations that stemmed from relinquishing my positional 'teacher-authority'. Following on from this section, I then present a selection of the data in order to explore the impulses and aspirations of a number of these student participants. This is presented with a view to inciting reflection upon the impact of teacher/student relationships (ie authoritarian vs egalitarian) and their impact upon the learning and engagement of contemporary youth. The paper then concludes with some final, general observations and comments.

Methodology – an ethnographic approach

Rationale

Ethnography has a powerful presence in the history of educational research. From Paul Willis' (1977) foundational study, *Learning to Labour*, to Stephen Ball's (2003) study of middle class advantage to McLeod and Yates (2006) recent longitudinal research into Australian youth, ethnography's contribution to understanding socio-educational processes is clearly evident. However, we must also acknowledge power differentials between researchers and the researched (Pole and Morrison 2003). It is necessary to disrupt powerful adultist (Leach 1994) assumptions so that the young are better able to participate in the construction their own representations. Thus, I believe that a feminist emphasis on closeness, immersion, empathy and narrative (Lather 1991; Reinharz 1992) was vitally important to the successful generation of data in this youth-oriented research.

As a group, young people are routinely deprived of genuine voice. Defined by, and in relation to, adults (White and Wyn 2008) youth may be seen as colonized, controlled and silenced by the normalized power relations that systems and institutions impose upon the young. Regarded as needing surveillance, guidance and

'expert' care, youth are defined, constructed, spoken about, and spoken for, by adults (McGregor 2000). These are narratives of power purporting to represent the 'truth' of others and, as such, need to be challenged by the individual stories of those who are silenced by 'authority' and 'expert' opinion. Within the context of schools, such effects are magnified via the traditional hierarchical power relations of these institutions. In undertaking this research project, I decided that an ethnographic methodology would help to break down the barriers that result from such situations. I believed that it would help to establish the conditions that would encourage my student participants to 'talk back' to me in counter-narratives of their own making.

The research foci that framed my broader study related to the social and cultural impact/s upon the behaviour, attitudes and identity construction of the young in respect to the following: globalisation; communication technologies; and 'postmodern' subjectivity. Because my research participants were all high school students and I was their teacher and the research was largely conducted within the context of the school, a sub-theme emerged in respect to the dissonance between the hierarchical power structures of traditional schooling and the emergent, postmodern subjectivities of my young participants. Clearly there is much historical evidence that points to youthful resistance within such institutions. However, what interested me as a researcher was the intellectual nature of the resistance from my research participants. They did not reject *learning*, but rather the *narrowness* of *curriculum* and the *authoritarian manner* of its delivery. By the end of the study I had concluded that, in order to best respond to the educational needs of many contemporary youth, schooling systems must become more finely attuned to the socio-cultural and technological revolutions that are shaping the attitudes and subjectivities of their students and develop new paradigms of engagement.

However, the highly individual texts created during my research project are not, in themselves, presented as ‘truths’. Rather, they are offered as tentative *representations* which may provide *artefacts of reflection* about contemporary youthful experiences. As Miller and Glassner observe, “[Qualitative] research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide *access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds*” (1997, 100, emphasis added). To avoid colonising the stories of others I have striven to allow maximum space for the individual stories of my participants. My interpretations of *their* texts stem from my own positionality as participant-researcher. Differently positioned readers of *my* texts will inevitably derive their own meanings.

As a positionally powerful adult-teacher-researcher, and wishing to disrupt the teacher/student binary, I also decided to draw upon the ideas of Russian intellectual, Mikhail Bakhtin. He conceived of *dialogue*, not just as two people conversing, but as:

The extensive set of conditions that are immediately modelled in any actual exchange..... but not exhausted in such an exchange dialogue means communication between simultaneous differences (cited in Clark and Holquist 1984, 9).

This conceptual framework helped to shape the nature of my journey with the student participants. Thus, as the research progressed, in response to the contribution of student writings, I, too, shared my work with them. The by-product, that is also the focus of this paper, was the evolution of the increasingly egalitarian relationship between me and my students *and the impact of that upon their intellectual work with me*. An example of this may be seen in the following email, received from a student who had just read one of my chapters:

Hmmmmm ...

Silence...

The now:

Hmmmmm...

Hmmmmm... Neo-post-structuralist, quasi-post-modern, post-colonial, neo-imperialist, post-yesterday, pre-tomorrow, new-Tuesday last week, neo-the day I stubbed my toe two months ago? (Sums it up for me)

Hmmmm...we could have coffee sometime perhaps...we can keep it a little less Post Modern if you don't mind (e.g. not refer to it as a 'reading of pre-adulthood post-colonial literatures' and stuff like that). It's not very pm to criticise my use of monosyllables which are in themselves an indication of society as the 'so-called modernist canon'. (just practising for uni ...e.g. bullshit post-modern speak when you haven't done any research or want to advance a certain ideology ...can't you just imagine a nazi reading of moby dick, as opposed to a feminist one, in which the great white whale is a metaphor for the oppressed aryan peoples or something.)

.....Anyhow let us digress from my ever growing + passionate hatred of post-modern philosophy – the most immature, over-politicised and crudely populist (without being popular) of all the systems of thought ever proposed by an obscure academic trying to advance their petty politics... sorry couldn't resist ☺
Hmmmm ...Look forward to your writing ...send me some soon ...Good luck with it Write back soon ...Respectfully yours...Neal.

And:

Hmmm...Read chapter 4 (or most of it anyway)... I've only got a few comments which you don't need to take any notice of because it's essentially good ... umyeah so just ignore what you don't agree with:

* Firstly, I think maybe, that you don't need to use quite so many pm terms – constructions etc. Um...hmm..pm writing is notorious for being used to disguise things that are essentially bullshit. What you are saying isn't bullshit! So just say it, simply and clearly.....do you have to use jargon??? (It's not too big a problem but anyway...)Most major literary critics + writers of the past 300 years (excluding pmists) have tried to write in a more natural language. I know it has to be academic but still simplicity is beautiful :)

In contrast to these sensitive reflections, Neal and others frequently expressed a frustration with their formal curriculum and their relations with other teachers. This observation was from another email:

At the moment I am dealing with the mediocrity of Mr X in doing my IPT [computing assignment and find it very hard to be patient. He is one of those people that in reality knows nothing but masks it by intimidating people. I know his because I know a bit about computer programming – actually it's possibly the thing I'm best at though I don't like it anymore. He knows nothing and in his stupidity has set an assignment full of the petty attention to detail of a minor bureaucrat which not a single member of the class will finish by the due date....

These, and other student texts generated by my research provide the evidence upon which I have based my arguments in this paper. The conclusions derived from this ethnographic research construct just one perspective (mine, the researcher's) on the indeterminacy of human contexts and behaviours. Moreover, the reader of *my* texts is also drawn into a relationship with researcher and researched and he/she reflects upon data rich in the particularities that engender questions about broader social processes, practices and assumptions. As Thomas notes:

The core of critical ethnography is the study of the process of domestication and social entrapment by which we are made content with our life conditions. ... Critical Ethnography takes seemingly mundane events, even repulsive ones, and reproduces them in a way that exposes broader social processes of control, taming, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviours over others (1993, 7-9).

Thus, I make no claim to presenting incontestable 'truths' in this paper. The data presented invites reflection upon the construction of young people and the ways we mostly continue to subordinate-as-we-educate despite socio-cultural indicators of foreshortened childhoods, fragmentation of traditional structures and increased personal responsibility for the 'project of the self' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

As noted by White and Wyn:

The shift towards individual responsibility and choice means young people will be less prepared to be passive recipients of education, which means their participation in all aspects of schooling, including decision making, will become an expectation (2008, 154).

My research project with these students led me to the conclusion that schools need to re-envision working relationships with students. Educators cannot ignore the powerful forces of social change that are re-drawing maps of identity and meaning and impacting upon the ways in which young people may or may not engage in learning. The next sub-section describes a range of contextual factors that helped to shape the nature of my research encounters.

Contextual factors

Hoffman State High School is situated in a major metropolitan area of Australia's subtropical state of Queensland. Largely middle class and multicultural, the school lies very close to a major university and draws a significant number of its students from the families who staff it. Hence, many members of the student body had a 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) shaped by intellectual factors. The selection of research participants was shaped by their availability. I was a practising secondary teacher at the time I started my research and my participants were derived from the school at which I worked. Having obtained ethical clearance and permission from school

administrators, I approached students in my Year 11 Modern History and English classes and their parents and explained the rationale for my research. The students from whom I derived most data were distinctive by the intellectual nature of their relationships and their propensity for student activism and challenging teacher authority.

As consent forms were returned, I began conducting interviews with participants. As well as organizing lunch-time interviews and discussions, I made extensive notes and collected students' poetry, prose and e-mail correspondence. I also encouraged students to submit a variety of artefacts such as photographs and artworks. Because my professional responsibilities positioned me as a component of the schooling 'system', in order to engage the trust of my student participants, I decided to establish a 'thirdspace' (Soja 1996) that would help facilitate the disruption of the teacher/student oppositional binary. Soja's thirdspace describes such a positioning as simultaneously 'insider', 'outsider', both and neither – perhaps the inevitable site of postmodern research, a space not easy to occupy and full of ambiguous moments. Therefore, I began to leave my classroom (D2) unlocked so that they could use it at lunch-time for meetings or socialising. Having D2 as a designated site for our discussions and interviews helped to establish a less formal teacher/student relationships and provided student participants with a space for greater freedom of expression once they realised that I was not going to censor their language and/or topics. This space did not 'create' the conversations but it did provide an *area-apart* in which the accepted teacher/student power binary could be disrupted. This meant that I became privy to thoughts and ideas not normally shared with teachers. The data generated by these students in these spaces *contradicted* their official reputations troublemakers and academic failures. The response from students to

having this space is exemplified in the following poem and in Ken's reflections that follow a little later:

Neal's *D2 Poem*:

Throbbing warmth of conversation and yellow light
Where outside it is cold and grey.
Laughing – discussing youthful dreams + learning
Literature, music – busy social point.
Classroom but also place of space.
People live here + experience + grow + learn
And from this Power is derived.
And tho some may be intimidated,
Many learn + enjoy + gain.
And thus from the piles of coffee in the corner
D2 is a garden to many romantic aspirations –
A hotbed of dreams.....

It was also in this room that the Social Justice and Equity Group (to which most of my participants belonged) would meet. The student-run Social Justice and Equity Group was a traditional student body at the school. Each year its causes depended upon the interests of the students and the 'tolerance' of the school administrators. Many of my participants belonged to this group and during my two years of research pushed boundaries within the school by addressing issues around Gay Rights and homophobia. Having a 'safe' space within which to debate and plan should not be discounted and seen as trivial. Clearly, students will engage in discussions of interest *anywhere* but - having a 'room of one's own' creates a focal point and attributes a certain status to the activities that may serve to concentrate personal power. As noted by Foucault:

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat (1980, 252).

Such ideas are supported by these notes from Ken:

I started to ponder over which was better, saving the world from the painful grasps of oppression and mental slavery or an okay lunchtime with friends Walking into D2 I felt slightly intimidated by all the bright and confident people already seated ... Sitting down in a chair I listened to what everyone else was talking about. I decided that, although everyone was open to my suggestions, I would take a half-hearted approach to liberation.

I can't remember how it happened, but after a while I realized that I had suddenly become a part of this group and we were starting to get some focus. The group, after compiling a school wide survey, decided we should have a Body Rights Week, five days of celebrating our differences and liberating ourselves from the oppression of others' expectations. There were food stalls, information stalls, speakers, workshops and even a belly

dancer named Princess Shahara! It was amazing to see the school so open-minded and I felt like we had achieved a mini utopian society.

I think that if I had not walked into D2 that day, maybe I would not know as many interesting people as I do now and maybe I would not understand these issues as much as I do. Throughout the year, from being in the Social Justice and Equity Group, I feel that it has opened a doorway of increased awareness of myself, others and ways to address issues within not only our school but society in general.

However, I had not anticipated the degree of hostility from colleagues that subsequently stemmed from my increasing informality with my student participants. I believe that such attitudes illustrate a significant lack of recognition of the impact of contemporary social change on young people's lives and their responses to traditional modes of schooling. There are clearly different levels of engagement of many youth necessitated by today's social contexts:

Young people forge their identities through active engagement with the local and global realities they find, and hence make sense of new social realities in ways that are different from the ways of older generations (White and Wyn 2008, 4).

Consequently, I would argue that, as educators, we need to readjust *our* engagement with them.

In keeping with the need to establish close connections with students to facilitate the study I asked my students to call me by my first name. According to Miller and Glassner:

Social distances that include differences in relative power can result in suspicion and lack of trust, both of which the researcher must actively seek to overcome. Rapport building is the key to this process. Establishing trust and familiarity, showing genuine interest, assuring confidentiality and not being judgemental are some important elements of building rapport (1997, 106).

Being on a first name basis with students was a practice I had engaged in previously, but with limited success. Only the 'daring', it seems, are able to overcome the years of authoritarian conditioning that forbid such familiarity within Queensland schools. However, these students seemed to see this (very small) act as significant. For them, it was such a novel thing to be able to call a teacher by her first name. However, some staff members reacted with surprising hostility to the students' use of my name, especially when they asked for me at my staff room.

I have not the space in this paper to speculate about the reasons for such responses, however, in retrospect I believe I was probably naïve to have embarked on an extensive ethnographic study in the context of a Queensland high school at which I was a teacher. The degree of closeness required to do good ethnographic studies was inevitably to clash with my role as a teacher and assumed disciplinarian. If I had maintained the officially preferred ‘distance’ of teacher and student, these young people would have revealed very little of themselves. As ‘Glenda’ (not, the institutionally mandated ‘Ms McGregor’) I became privy to the private preoccupations and discussions that failed to find an outlet in the official curriculum. The following discussion shows their interest in existentialism. It was lunchtime in D-2 and a CD of Ginsberg’s poem, *Howl*, provided the background ‘noise’:

Jack: The existentialists were completely against suicide because it was like the ultimate tragedy- life – according to Camus – was whether to live or to die....

Neal: Yeah – Camus – Camus thought of it as like-like a really bad thing –

Jack: Well see the thing is the way *I* look at it ...it-it’s up to – it’s up to yourself...to just...you know live life.....like there’s no like, purpose for us to be here – there’s no you know – yeah – we weren’t put on here for a purpose – we were just put on here..... You are the sum total of everything you’ve experienced in life...

Dean: You can sit there and think and wonder why we’re here for the rest of your life while around you everything is going on or you can just go out and say well this is the way it is and I might find out or I might not but I might as well just livea philosopher will ask why are we here – why are we on the earth and stuff like that – but the fact is that *we’re here* and whether there’s a great reason there – we’re still here so why not just like, live your life and if you find out then that’s great...Don’t waste your life thinking?! (*laughter*).....

Neal: Thinking isn’t a waste of life.. thinking is as meaningful as anything else....what’s meaningful about sitting there your whole life and making money – look at people’s lives – what pleasure do they get out of it? They work all day so that they can have like one hour to learn something

Jack: If thinking’s fun then do it but if it’s not then don’t! (*ironically*. - Hedonism’s the way to go – (*laughter*).....

Allen: Instead of searching for truth I’m just like searching for beauty....

Jack: Fun!

Neal: Basically everyone’s a nihilistic hedonist....Truth is obtained through suffering not through hedonism.....

Glenda: Why does it have to be obtained through suffering?

Jack: Yeah – why do you have to go through a whole heap of *shit* to see the light?

Neal: Because you do...

Jack: I don’t want to *see* suffering... I don’t want to *be* the suffering person – I want to be *happy*!

Neal: You have to be prepared to rip yourself apart to find truth.....

Glenda: Really? That’s provocative Neal....

Dean: The fact is that you don’t *need* truth – you only need it if you *want* it....cause you only need what you want.....truth is whatever you find it to be and there is no real definition of it...

Jack: **There’s no truth only interpretations!**

Obviously these were bright students and likely to engage in intellectual debate within their own spaces. However, what became clear to me as I listened to their stories and read their texts was that our research encounters were providing them with an outlet for extending their intellectual and literary interests within contexts reminiscent of university tutorials rather than school classrooms. The freedom of expression and informality of relationship seemed to encourage students to explore beyond the official curriculum offerings.

By the second year a number of students were actively reading a range of writers and philosophers such as the Romantics, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Foucault, Kerouac, and Ginsberg. Two of the students (Paul and Neal) had been accepted into an extension course at a local university and were successfully completing first year subjects in philosophy and history. A third student (Cornell) would have qualified but due to his 'troublesome' label he was prevented from enrolling, despite the fact that no other students applied. Consequently, the third place remained vacant. However, Cornell eventually negotiated with the course lecturer to allow him to attend sessions on an informal basis, thus circumventing the dictates of the school administration. From my field observations, these young people thus became more confident to question concepts and authoritative platitudes. However, this also led to their being named as 'troublesome' or 'uncivil'.

The students' tendency to play games with authority also contributed to the tension: Allen wearing a party hat during an important exam and smiling at teacher chastisements; Jack, bare-foot and dancing away from teachers with a laugh that invited them to chase him; playfulness, picnics, laughter, music and swearing....the word 'fuck' being the ultimate weapon in the reversal of the dictated order things. They used this word constantly in texts and conversations as if it were the ultimate

taboo. These behaviours are institutional irritants. However, I would argue that they are also superficial distractions that should not dominate relations with young people. The need to engage such challenging students inevitably becomes lost in the ensuing power struggles that seek to silence and control so-called 'rebellious youth'.

Nevertheless, I do not write this paper within large 'truth-claims' about the nature of young people and schooling today. For two years I observed, conversed with and read the works of a diverse group of young people, many of whom were not engaged with and were not particularly successful *at school*. Those who were successful academically were looking for more personal meaning from their studies. My interpretations of the findings suggest that the more egalitarian nature of our research encounters encouraged these students to openly and collaboratively explore many of the issues confronting them in the 'risk society' (Beck 1992): identity, meaning, family tensions, life-pathways and the impacts of drugs and alcohol.

At the school at which this research took place, students who challenged institutional authority were constructed as 'troublemakers' whose names were freely bandied about at staff meetings, as 'jokes' were made about their activities and attitudes and the possibility of 'getting rid' of these individuals. Contained within such talk were clear assumptions of 'good' and 'bad' students which created binaries in which the interests of those who 'conformed' were automatically privileged over those who did not. Teachers *did not expect* 'troublemakers' to succeed *academically*, as evidenced by the surprised comments to such students when they did well in exams or assignments. The power of normalising processes attempted to impose uniformity whilst also marginalizing those students who 'talked back'. I now turn to some of the texts generated by these students as illustrations of their significant intellectual engagement during this project.

Transgressions: ‘Speak your mind even if your voice shakes’ⁱ

From the evidence I gathered from my research participants, it appears that those who experienced most conflict with schooling authorities were among the most creative and critical thinkers in the group. Moreover, their conflicts were not the consequences of violent and abusive acts. Inevitably, conflicts with peers, teachers and/or the administration principally arose because of what they *said* and sometimes how they *looked*. They engendered counter-hegemonic discourses via words and symbols that engaged them in power struggles, perhaps best defined as “the counter-discourse of prisoners *and those we call delinquents*” (Foucault 1977, 209 emphasis added). Such resistance seemed to be directed against the inevitability of becoming part of *the system* as demonstrated in this exchange:

Glenda: What do you mean by ‘the system’? You use that word a lot.

Paul: Essentially anything that isn’t me It’s everything else in the world – everything that I disagree with – like the way the school works – I mean obviously because it’s a system it refers to something – the inner workings of something – not the inner workings of me and it’s ‘bad’ it all goes together and works in this big mean system that everyone’s afraid of and it fucks everyone up... sothat’s the system....like-like schools and work and-and jails.....

Jack: School is really irrelevant, right? But - so therefore we shouldn’t do school but if we don’t, then the irrelevant society will look on us and say like, you know, they didn’t go to school, so we have to fit the irrelevant image to fit into irrelevant society.....

Such discussions with these young people consistently revealed a complex mix of pragmatism and idealism and they did not ‘group’ in ‘subcultural resistance’ to authority. Rather they often appeared to be frustrated by the kinds of educational experiences they found at school:

Simone: You get all your shit together in holidays and stuff and you come to school and it falls apart again ... school is so impossible, with stress and ... the authority structures ... Some people can’t deal with other people having different perspectives on anything ... I think I’m destined to be a teacher, actually. I know I’ll be a teacher one day but I don’t want to educate people. I don’t think that what we are getting is education except maybe learning from what we *don’t* want it to be. I think education is learning *how* to think

Indeed, in despite the fact that some of them were either failing *school* or at least failing to achieve to their potential, they did not reject *learning*. Rather, they refused

to do that which they decided was *irrelevant* to themselves or a contradiction of their ideals:

Jack: Probably my only belief that I only...sort of I'd want to stick with is I just don't want to become a 'paper-pusher' - I don't want to be stuck in a 9 to 5 job tapping away at some computer that's printing out shit that I really don't care about.

There is a very significant difference between actions of *resistance* and *affirmation*. While the former implies a fight *against* something the latter suggests a struggle *for* something, which may be, however, inaccurately labelled as resistance. Once more I return to de Beauvoir (1962) who also claimed that the *negative* connotations of revolt actually become *positive* if the *actions* promote freedom, by strongly asserting the independence of freedom in relation to things. This notion is a constant in the exchanges:

Cornell: It's still incredibly arrogant and dogmatic, you know, to think that you can justify....imposing *your* will on someone – You know? That *your* rationale is *correct*..... My thoughts.....my *thoughts* are everything to me....

Paul: They think they *own* our thoughts!

It was also constantly evident in their written texts as exemplified in William's poem

Overload:

Coming back to the hustle bustle early morning traffic rising,
traffic flowing without feeling only to be late....
Half the day gone at 9.01ⁱⁱ with red paper as my only excuse....
"Be seated, be quiet, don't ask, don't think, say what, where,
and why, when I want and without question."
Restriction, constriction, oppression for concession
and all to learn about what I must forget tomorrow so not to
overload the cramming of useless crap.
Think back to stiff, sleepless ruby nights awakening to whips
and screams from birds and babes.....rain again to hush
the last embers of past warmth and light...
Oh the ability to stand, speak and question what,
when and where I like without condescending shrugs
to fool the fire of the burning ego....
I join the system to learn, earn and save to buy and live by stress
only to escape to a destination where I can live – well fuck that!
It's time to live, time to fly, and make my life the destination,
the holiday, the being, and seeing....
To be me, MYSELF,
NOW!

Instead of a blind rebuttal of authority figures via disruptive behaviours, they began to intellectualize their resistance and as their confidence grew in terms of the legitimacy of their position, they evolved towards an assertive affirmation of their rights. Their personal agency evolved into exercises of power by crossing boundaries and *transgressing* in ways that find some resonance in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) concept of *carnival*.

The 'carnavalesque' subverts the status quo by reversing symbolic values. The 'unspoken' is proclaimed and the 'revered' blasphemed. It is based on satire, vulgarities and play. For these students, *carnival* would bubble over spontaneously as the mood took them. To the nostalgic tunes of Jazz and Blues blaring from the school radio, they took off their shoes (against the rules) and danced (often in costumes) in grassy spaces on the school quadrangle. On one such occasion a teacher on playground duty told Jack to put his shoes on and he laughed and pretended to run away. She called the school principal who followed her back to the quadrangle and gravely pointed to my classroom and suggested that such bizarre behaviour stemmed from my relationship with the boys. Indeed, he had come to the conclusion that my contacts with these students had *emboldened* them. However, the students' *questioning* of authority also seemed to fuel their *quest* for learning. They began to experiment with intellectual freedom and a more egalitarian ethos of sharing.

According to Moshman:

School discussions, especially with regard to controversial matters, often take place in contexts where (a) the presentation of disfavoured alternatives is subtly discouraged or explicitly forbidden, (b) access to disfavoured alternatives is similarly restricted or prevented, and (c) teacher authority and/or peer pressure channel thinking into socially acceptable directions (1999, 114).

These students wrote spontaneously and haphazardly without regard for convention. Reflecting the preoccupations of 19th Century Romantic and 20th Century Beatⁱⁱⁱ writers, their thoughts and reactions were what mattered most. In the following

excerpt from Jack's notebook sensations flow into one another in a stream of images that merge according to the logic of pure emotional experience. Like his Romantic and Beat literary heroes, in his writing Jack attempted to capture the intensity of the moment couched within a bed of personal philosophical reflections:

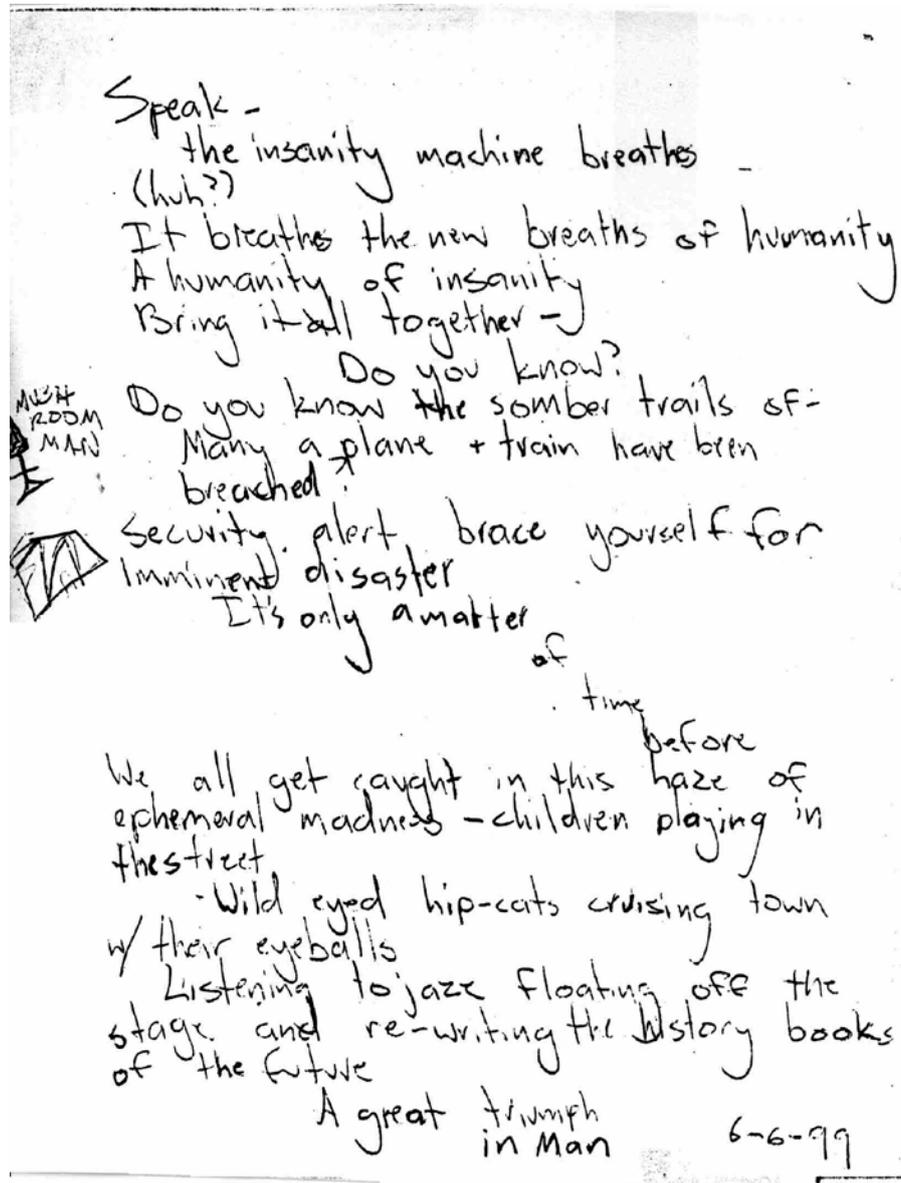


Figure 1. Sample of Jack's writing

Such data reveal that these students searched actively beneath the superficial assumptions of their worlds, subsequently expressing their ideas and explorations in a range of poetry and prose. In the following extract from a much longer poem, *The*

buddha sees truth, Allen wholeheartedly embraces the concept of postmodern multiple realities:

The buddha sees truth
The mind's eye sees the whole consciousness of life
The wild-haired horse-throated preacher in the street sees truth
The straight-lined life-is-numbers acolyte of science sees truth
The big-bucks fat-pants progress-is-the-truth brick of society sees truth
"The western man" whilst blasting at high speeds on his neurotic train of life sees truth
Consumer no.51 with the suction-cupped face to the stream of colours and products and crazy need for more ideas sees truth
The neo-urban social dropout on a psychedelick trip sees truth
The men who make bombs and eat grease see truth
The people who lived and loved and died in holy circumstances saw the light of truth
Jesus saw truth
Mohammed saw truth
The saints and all the angels really are true
The facts are also true...

This student's life was often extremely stressful. His mother was a manic-depressive and he was often the one person who could deal with her outbursts. It often left him drained and emotionally vulnerable:

I brought her out of it because I just came out, but it just kind of left me emotionally and mentally a wreck. After that my dad took me out for a drive up to Mt Glorious and on the way up I was just talking to my dad about it and I just started crying and I cried the most I've ever cried in my life. It was fully just like a drug washing over. Like some kind of narcotic or something.....

His school results deteriorated over the two years of the research and conflicts with teachers and the administration surfaced more regularly. His appreciation of the absurdity of life simply disturbed them as he sat smiling to himself or arrived at exams wearing party hats. Similarly his blunt observations of school life made many people uncomfortable:

The Teacher

Like a jerky puppet she puts on a face for each act and scene that comes along – look she's a philosopher – now she's a fucking clown, a humanitarian, an electric-shock freak lost in a blank room, a cake of melting butter, a machine that takes living words and kills her own lamb, she's a lamb.

However, even a cursory reading of the work this student shared with me reveals a keen intellect, significant creative insights and the rejection of universal answers or truths. He was disliked by some teachers and the administration and classed as a

'failure'. There were times when he came close to exclusion and was told on at least one occasion that if he wouldn't leave school at least he served some purpose in the statistical distribution. He recounted to me that a teacher had said, *We need the 'E'* students to spread the group. He was thus categorised and written off as deficient – socially as well as academically. Yet, within the spaces of this research he demonstrated a willingness to explore learning at a very high level.

The samples presented in this paper are but a small number of student texts generated during my two year study. They were not selected from writings generated as part of the official school curriculum. There was a feeling among the students that the kinds of writing they engaged in privately would not be welcome (emphasis added):

Jack: Um, yeah, Neal and I are starting up a literary magazine. We are going to try and make it as cheap as possible for people, and it's going to be, like, poetry and prose and all sorts of literary thingamajigs. By students for students. *It will be an advocate of free speech as so much as we are allowed* - which really sucks. And the problem is, certain teachers, who will remain nameless at this school, don't give a fuck about the agreed-upon guidelines anyway, and just go off on their own fucking tangents, and like.....oh the radio is up to 85 decibels, well it's too loud, you know turn it down*You don't want to be really offensive...it's necessary sometimes to have a swear word ...*

Many research participants had definite views on the education system and how it needed to be improved in terms of student engagement and diversity as exemplified in this exchange:

Paul: The education system in Australia is really geared to a white middle class populace....and then you have the private school system with the elite ones that are geared towards a more upper classummm there's nothing around for the poor and the-the working class and all of the minority groups...

Cornell: What Paul was talking about? – Perhaps an extension of that – perhaps the reason why *so* many people have this aversion to schools is because it's hypocritical.....they supposedly encourage all this diversity but then they have these incredibly conservative definitions of knowledge and things.....

However, when I asked the group about how they would go about organizing Hoffman High as their 'ideal school', they dissolved into heated disagreement:

Jimi: No way would you ever get the entire population of this school to agree on how it should be run....

Paul: We would have to de-educate people of all the indoctrination they've had pumped into them for – in my case – the last twelve years and in the Year 8s' case, the last seven

years....so you'd need to start at the beginning – starting, like with a fresh breed of children going into education....you'd need to start with them...and have a much more community based system.....

Jimi: No – it wouldn't work because the whole idea of having someone teaching something to someone else – there has to be a certain amount of respect in that the people who are being taught have to look up to this person in order to fully take in everything.... but if you break it down you have nothing left....

Cornell: Yes you do! Yes you fucking DO!!!!!!!

Jack: There's a difference between, like, 'respect' and silent hatred! (laughter)

Allen: There's a difference between authority and respect....

Jimi: But teachers have to take on the role of authority....because in classrooms there are cases where teachers just have to!

Cornell: But that also doesn't work, man....it puts people in this position – You're BAD! Therefore you act like that.....

Jack: I think the school system should be more based, like on the way universities are run...(murmurs of 'Yeah-yeah..').

This is an interesting exchange demonstrating the diversity within the group. Unlike others in the group, Jimi had never had any significant conflicts with school authorities. As with most students who publicly accepted the status quo, his dissatisfaction with particular teachers and/or school decisions was expressed privately. This conversation also illustrates the critical competency of 'dissident students' such as Allen, Paul, Jack and Cornell in terms of their ability to deconstruct discourses of 'teacher authority' and 'respect'. In a time of educational restructuring, it would appear, however, that this resource has been completely ignored. According to Lingard et al. "much educational restructuring has been *done to*, rather than *with* teachers" (2002, 15). Consider then how such 'reforms' must appear from a *student* perspective. However, as evident from the data generated, students relished the opportunities provided to engage in educational debates without fear of 'offending' – either through perceived arrogance or in using swearwords which stemmed from the vehemence of their feelings rather than any overt desire to 'shock'.

Concluding thoughts ...

From the data, I have concluded that the conduct of my research project facilitated *contexts* and *catalysts* that encouraged students to explore and, subsequently, voice,

their feelings about their worlds, thereby also facilitating greater *intellectual* engagement.

Such views are supported by many student comments, exemplified by the following two:

Glenda: Why did you agree to participate in this project?

Malcolm: Cause it's a worthwhile vent for my beliefs....whereas the other day I said I was going to give up arguing in the classroom.....and I haven't – but I want to because I'm just so sick of it – it's just a waste of time – the teachers kind of just go 'Yeah-yeah-yeah' and the people around just go on scribbling on the tables and ..

Glenda: Do you think that many people listen to young people like yourself – do they take you seriously?

Malcolm: They listen but they don't take me seriously...

Glenda: Because of...what?

Malcolm: My age...

And –

Simone: It's such a bizarre thing to go to school and to sit in a chair and to listen to somebody schpieling off what they know even though a lot of the time the teachers don't know anything anyway and just rote learning this big chunks of information but not actually, you know, thinking about anything...or evaluating anything or analysing anything which is probably the most important.... I used to sit around wishing things would be different but you have shown us that to change anything you have to live that change: be that change: create the change. No more sitting around wishing for a revolution, you have to *be* the revolution.....

I would argue that it is unrealistic and unhelpful to expect silent, unquestioning obedience from young people. According to this participant, Allen:

The thing that is non-negotiable, is freedom - that's the thing about all those teachers when they try and bring their power trip down on me ...I just laugh at them because they have nothing on me....they are just the same as me. nobody is above or below...

Also, given the multiplying sources of knowledge in the globalising, postmodern contexts of their worlds outside of school it is highly doubtful whether students are likely to regard the words of their teachers as incontestable. Texts gathered during the course of this research indicate youthful engagement with the multi-mediated world beyond the control of the school. In the following email, one of the students, Paul, reflects excitedly upon the possibilities that flow from that:

Paul (email): 'New Cosmopolitan' applies especially to the cybersocieties (virtual social narratives, pseudocommunities) of the Internet's young They are online, their brains, their consciousnesses are ONLINE. That is well and truly fucking amazing...

He later shared with me some notations for an essay he was preparing:

We are currently in the throes of a technological revolution, the likes of which have not been seen since the industrial revolution, and one which has the potential to drastically revolutionise the concept of self. Informationalisation – the shift in societal and economic practices towards a reliance on the access, generation and processing of large quantities of information – is heralding a new cosmopolitan paradigm, one that sees the identity of the self move away from the nation-state and towards global cultural and economic networks. Driving this shift is cutting edge computer-mediated, cultural and social interaction and the rise of the global, informational ‘hypernetwork’ economy.

On the ‘superhighway of knowledge’, young people have access to ideas and attitudes beyond their schooling experiences. They are armed with the knowledge of the contestability and fragility of meta-narrative ‘truths’:

Destabilised and less predictable life pathways mean that young people must continually make choices about what is salient for them at particular times. Sometimes such choices may be at odds with the expected attributes or behaviours of the ‘phase of life’ that is applied to them by adults and society, and as such they are marginalised or further tagged as ‘problem’ cases (Ryan 2007, 246).

Thus, if educators are to engage all students in relevant and meaningful learning they must acknowledge these forces and transform, not just the curriculum, but also the hierarchical power relations of schools that currently pay lip service to dialogues with youth. My data has led me to conclude that educational institutions need to develop more egalitarian relations within school settings that better reflect the social milieu of our times and thus engage the intellect and insights of young people like, Neal, who provides the concluding words to this paper. Perhaps a blunt reminder to all educators who mistakenly label students as academic and personal failures when they refuse to ‘perform’ the official curriculum – An extract from Allen’s poem *Prayer*:

Do not cast me into your dark box of shame!
Get your judgements out of our heads ...
Where the fuck do you get off?
Are we merely the manifestation of some bestial spirit?
How dare you in all your ways seek to judge us,
Imprison us in our own minds with ghostly figures and cold mirrors!
I will *deny* your existence and cast you into the thoughtless oblivion!

Notes

ⁱ Sticker from Berkley University above my blackboard put there by one of the students.

ⁱⁱ Students arriving after 9am were marked as being absent for half a day.

ⁱⁱⁱ Radical intellectuals of the 1950s, (subsequently labelled 'beatniks'), who appropriated elements of European existentialist philosophies. These ideas found new expression in the writing of Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Neal Cassidy.

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