Developing counter-narratives that challenge neoliberal discourses of schooling 'disengagement': The need for a professional alliance between youth work and teaching

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Abstract
Contemporary global economic contexts are shaped by a neoliberal paradigm of hyper-individualism and meritocratic frameworks that are increasingly guiding national policies in education and welfare. Schools are expected to focus on the production of human capital and student achievements are internationally benchmarked for competitive advantage. As social safety nets diminish, citizens are expected to be more personally accountable. This has created challenges for the poor and marginalised who are positionally disadvantaged in highly competitive neo-capitalist economies. Young people from social categories that sit below the traditional working class due to the precariousness of employment and living conditions are among the most vulnerable people in any society. Resource poor, many struggle to connect with schools and find meaning in a world that has relegated them to the margins. Such young people make up the apparently growing numbers of 'disengaged', 'at risk' and sometimes 'dangerous' and 'sick' youth who have become a focal point for official interventions that may be punitive and/or therapeutic or medical. Drawing upon the contrasting perspectives of teaching staff and youth workers in one Australian state, this paper argues for a change in the way schooling authorities construct and respond to the phenomenon of schooling 'disengagement'.

Key words: schooling disengagement, neoliberalism, deficit youth, youth work, teaching

Introduction

Deficit constructions of young people are not new. Since the early twentieth century along with the rise of developmental psychology, the period of youth and adolescence has been represented as a stage in the lives of young people frequently requiring intervention and supervision (Johnson 1993). Those who fall through the net of normalizing practices of individual cultures are often viewed negatively; as noted by Hebdige, non-conforming young people are often associated with 'social pathology, urban disequilibrium, and the breakdown of the organic balance of city life' (1988, 27). Henry Giroux draws connections between such attitudes and conservative agendas 'for dispensing with those youth they view as disposable, if not dangerous, to the imperatives of the free market and global economy' (1998, 34). In recent writing he (Giroux 2009, 72) declares that such processes amount to a 'war on youth' – particularly marginalised youth:

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While the predicament of all youth under the regime of neoliberalism deepens in the midst of the current economic crisis, it does not affect all young people in the same way. More and more working-class and middle-class youth and poor youth of color either find themselves in a world with vastly diminishing opportunities or are fed into an ever-expanding system of disciplinary control that dehumanizes and criminalizes their behaviour.

What Giroux and others (see for example, Grossberg 2001; Gewirtz and Cribb 2009; Fielding and Moss 2011) assert is that the negative stereotyping of economically alienated and socially disenfranchised young people as 'disengaged', 'dangerous' and 'at risk' shifts the responsibility for the problems of youth away from government systems and powerful corporations to the young people themselves.

The re-framing of public policy in respect of education and youth around neoliberal principles such as accountability, data, market-based practices, individualism and managerialism has been well documented (see for example, Grek 2013; Hursh 2013; Lingard et al. 2013). The competitive ethos underpinning these developments has contributed to deficit constructions of some categories of young people who, for a variety of reasons, fail to thrive under such conditions; consequently they are deemed to be 'disengaged' and in need of 'fixing' (Smyth and McInerney 2013; McGregor et al. 2012) so that they might make their contributions to national prosperity rather than being a drain on the system. Here, youth policies collude with education policies to shape coercive social contexts intended to drive young people into either 'learning' or 'earning'. As the research literature has argued for some time that most of the young people categorised as 'disengaged' tend to come from marginalised and/or low socio-economic backgrounds (see for example, Mills and McGregor 2014; Kane 2011; Abrams 2010; Connell, 1993; Willis 1977) such measures have serious social justice implications.

Absent from current debates about young people is recognition that the experience of youth has changed. Woodman and Wyn (2013) point to the need for a greater focus on the ways current global economic and technological influences are reshaping the lives of contemporary youth. Linear transitions from school to work to nuclear family are unpredictable in present social conditions and the very notion of what it means to be a student and/or worker separately or simultaneously is being redefined within shifting contexts of 'risk' related to the 'the side effects of successful modernization (Beck 2009). Given the neoliberal inclination towards individual 'choice' and the 'entrepreneurial self' it is clear that

those young people who have access to the most resources are best placed to respond and survive.

This paper is structured in three main sections: it begins with an overview of some of the key global influences shaping contemporary experiences of youth; this is followed by a detailed examination of the adverse effects these processes have on marginalised young people. This second section includes data gathered from interviews with teachers in mainstream educational settings and a range of youth and community workers. A final discussion of the implications that flow from these contexts concludes the article.

A New Millennium

Postmodernity and rapid globalisation have combined to craft social contexts within which change is a constant. The postmodern context (Harvey 1989; 2005) is characterized by an emphasis on diversity and a plurality of life-worlds; people are expected to 'upgrade' frequently - both their technology *and* themselves. Such challenges and opportunities favour those with the economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) necessary to survive and prosper.

One of the key economic consequences of globalisation has been the rise of an increasingly complex global network of flexible capital flows, largely independent of nation states and the demands of organized labour. There are accompanying flows of people, technology, science, images and information (Appadurai 2002) but these are often deemed to be subordinate to the imperative of capital accumulation as a globalising force. Harvey (2005) contends that the fundamental ideology underpinning social and economic transformations since the 1970s has been neoliberalism, which in economic terms is premised upon: private enterprise; entrepreneurship; competition; free markets; accountability; and small government. He also identifies neoliberal capitalism as the prime globalising force that has reshaped and continues to transform national economic frameworks from post-war welfare-ism to paradigms of individual deficiency and self-responsibility. Bauman (2001, 9) notes: 'In our 'society of individuals' all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made … For the good and the bad that fill one's life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame'. Such policies have had adverse consequences for disadvantaged and marginalised groups within societies due to subsequent cut-backs in government programs in high need areas of health, housing and education (Kilty and Segal 2006).

By 'going global', industries have been able to reintroduce increasingly unregulated labour practices such as sweatshops and short-term contracts. Unstable and highly competitive employment opportunities have delivered the traditional working classes into the hands of capitalist exploitation on a trans-national scale. This is Ulrich Beck's (2009) 'risk society'. Analyses of the effects of globalisation on childhood, for example, indicate that the experience of being young in the New Millennium is situated within highly variable global contexts of unequal opportunities and risks (de Block and Buckingham 2010). As noted by Beck and others (see Dolby and Rizvi 2007; Furlong and Cartmel 2007), 'wealth' in its many guises of material and cultural capital enables young people to maximise the advantages of postmodern fluidity and choice and utilise the benefits of having access (physical and virtual) to global networks. For young people on the margins of societies, however, the challenges of being young in the New Millennium are many.

Responding to 'risk': young people on the edge

Arguing from a youth welfare perspective, Finn, Nybell and Shook (2010) contend that it is the poorest, most marginalised young people in all societies who are bearing the heaviest burden of the risks and the inequities inherent in global capitalist systems. Drawing upon Scheper-Hughes' and Sargent's (1998) metaphor of children as 'canaries in the mine shaft' of social change, they argue that:

- Universal commitments to children have been eroded, replaced by competitive individualism that both masks and exacerbates inequalities;
- Childhood and children's behaviour have been increasingly medicalized and constructed as forms of pathology to be monitored, managed, treated, and contained.
- Economic trends have affected rich countries as well as poor ones, creating great wealth but generating greater inequality which impacts greatly upon children;
- Investment in public services and programs has decreased and punitive responses to the problems of children and youth have gained momentum; and
- Neoliberal capitalism has increased global exploitation of children through the marketization of childhood, child labour, the use of children as soldiers and child trafficking.

(Finn, Nybell and Shook 2010, 249-251)

It is not my intention to imply that all young people are necessarily 'powerless'. Like other segments of the population, young people are located in multiple global-local and temporal spaces further contextualised by manifold intersecting differences and thus they engage with their worlds in a great variety of ways, developing strategic ways to 'talk back' to oppression.

(Dimitriadis and Weiss 2001). Nonetheless, the evidence of growing global inequalities and their impacts upon young people must be foregrounded as part of a counter-narrative to discourses of escalating youthful mental illness and disengagement (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009).

Giroux (2009) links neoliberal frameworks to a criminalization and commodification of particular demographics of young people. In a recent interview he points to a 'pedagogy of surveillance' (Pollard 2014a, 181) that provides information about young people to the marketplace (via social media) and government authorities (via various security monitoring devices). Identifying the ways in which punitive measures have increased in western democracies for those most in need, Giroux also argues that marginalised young people are not simply identified as being 'at risk', they are also constructed as *the* risk' (see also Kelly 2007):

> In the media we see young people, especially poor black and brown kids, being demonized and being seen as a threat to society … what we're talking about is one of the most egregious consequences of what I call 'the punishing state' … It is also waging a war on young people (Pollard 2014a, 181).

This perspective is also reflected in Zygmunt Bauman's concepts of 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004) and 'collateral damage' (Bauman 2011). In recent works Bauman examines the ways in which the poor and marginalised have become the expendable 'waste' of present dominant social and economic structures; due to their relative positional powerlessness in respect of the adult world, children and young people are consequently most vulnerable to the negative effects of these emerging trends. Grossberg (2005) likewise identifies 'collateral' negative effects on young people from neoliberal policies; echoing Bauman, he talks about young people as being 'caught in the crossfire' of contemporary global upheavals. In a recent interview, Grossberg explains:

> I think it is a story of people saying, 'we need to clear youth out of the way in order to get where we need to go' … In some cases the story articulates youth not simply as youth, for instance, but as threatening young poor and minority bodies (Pollard 2014b, 238).

The side effects (collateral damage/crossfire) on youth of current systems are evident in data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which show that, along with those who comprise 'the poor', as a group, young people in member countries continue to be more negatively affected by the Global Financial Crisis (2007/8)

than other demographics and that youth have replaced the elderly as the group experiencing the greater risk of income poverty (OECD 2014). Additionally, between 2007 and 2011, the numbers of young people 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) increased in most OECD countries (OECD 2014). As social and economic conditions worsen many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have found themselves struggling with schooling-to-work transitions particularly as traditional forms of labour dry up. White and Wyn (2013, 125) also note that it is increasingly incumbent upon 'young people to make their own routes through education and work in new economies and negotiate new sets of risks in the form of personal choices'. Thus, for young people who leave school early or who are excluded from mainstream institutions, the challenge to find new meaningful pathways to work or education becomes overwhelmingly difficult. This group of 'NEETs' is causing increasing concern within OECD nations and engendering research and policy initiatives designed to find solutions to 'the problem'. Clearly, 'the problem' lies with unstable global capitalist landscapes that have negatively impacted on national economies worldwide; yet, official responses have framed 'the problem' in terms of youthful disengagement and pathology.

Managing 'the problem': 'I call them "mad, bad and sad"'[1]

Governments around the world have increasingly sought policy responses to what is perceived to be an emerging problem of youthful 'disengagement' from education. In England, for example, the Department for Children, Schools and Families' *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16* (DfCSF 2007) has sought to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training in that country by raising the compulsory school leaving age; and initiating the 'Youth Contract' which provides funds to organisations based on their results in respect of helping young people categorised as NEET transition into further education, training or employment (UK Government 2014). Similarly, in Australia, school retention is at the centre of an ongoing imperative to keep young people engaged in education and training with the goal of enhanced productivity outcomes that has become a feature of education systems in the global North (see Ball 2012; Apple 2007). Successive Australian Prime Ministers (Maher 2014) have made explicit links between national economic objectives and schooling and training. For example, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd outlined his vision thus: 'Human capital

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[1] Comment by a head teacher in one alternative school. He was referring to the kinds of young people who usually find their way to schools like his.

investment is at the heart of a third wave of economic reform that will position Australia as a competitive, innovative, knowledge-based economy that can compete and win in global markets' (Rudd and Smith 2007, 3).

Unfortunately, in Australia, welfare policies have also taken a punitive turn in respect of 'solving the problem' of youthful disengagement from education and training. For example, the 'earning-or-learning' agenda has progressively recast a universal unemployment scheme as one that is age specific. In order to obtain the Commonwealth Youth Allowance, young people aged 18-24 years have to be in some form of education or training; or, if aged 16-21, looking for full-time work or undertaking educational or training activities. (Australian Department of Social Services 2014). This has created a 'survival dilemma' for many young people who leave mainstream school early without having family or other networks of support. In order to meet the needs of such youth, there has been a surge of interest in alternative educational provision in many developed countries (see for example, Thomson 2014; Mills and McGregor 2014; Smyth and Wrigley 2013; Kim and Taylor 2008; Aron 2006; de Jong and Griffiths 2006).

In Australia, education is largely the responsibility of States and Territories which are supported by varying amounts of Commonwealth funding. Despite a strong state-based sector in all jurisdictions there are growing numbers of alternative learning options outside the government system for young people who leave school early. Unlike other 'alternative' philosophically prescriptive models such as Steiner and Montessori (see Kraftl 2013) or Summerhill-like (Neill 1968) democratic schools, the recent manifestations of alternative education cater to marginalised young people. The Dusseldorp Forum provides a comprehensive list of these sites and of the various approaches adopted by the charities and government departments that sponsor them (te Riele 2012). Additionally, recent Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research has facilitated the construction of a website 'designed to support the development of a community of practice, [that] contains a shared measurement framework for organisations that keep marginalised young people connected to education' (Enabling Spaces 2015).

Variously referred to as 'second chance', alternative schools or 'flexible learning centres/options', they run the full gamut of school-like structures from complete curricular offerings to one-off programs (see Thomson 2014; te Riele 2012). Such schooling options have a long history of educational experiments (Raywid 1999) that, although often short-lived, have provided important foundations for future initiatives (Sliwka 2008). Current manifestations of these earlier programs and sites reflect teaching practices and philosophies

that appear to be most effective for working with marginalised young people, specifically: small, supportive schooling environments; mutually respectful, democratic relationships; practical supports for life-needs such as food and accommodation; flexible schooling structures; and, personal learning plans that target student needs and aspirations (see for example, Young 1990; Conley 2002; Mills and McGregor 2014; Mills et al. 2015). Thus, historically and in present times, alternative educational initiatives arise in response to the needs of young people who are rejected by, or reject, mainstream schooling contexts. The reasons for such rejections are contextually grounded in the socio-cultural and economic circumstances of their times; clearly these will change, however, there are constant factors across time and place shaping these young lives that include varying degrees of the following: inequality, marginalisation, disenfranchisement, poverty and oppression (Smyth and Wrigley 2013). There is a growing body of literature (see for example, Apple 2007; Ball 2012; Connell 2013) arguing that currently favoured neo-liberal social and economic contexts are becoming less supportive of vulnerable youth who are struggling to comply with the consequences of the marketization of education. In recent decades, Australian education policies have been shaped by neoliberal influences, leading to a stronger focus on teacher accountability and standardized testing facilitating a narrowing of the curriculum, pressure upon creative pedagogies and engagement strategies, and negative consequences for many marginalised youth (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012; Thompson and Harbaugh 2013).

Within the aforementioned neoliberal landscape of 'collateral damage' and 'crossfire' these alternative providers are, indeed, applying 'triage' to the growing numbers of young people who are either discarded by a system with too-narrow a focus on accountability agendas; or who have left mainstream settings because they are the end-point victims of economic policies that are widening social divisions and shaping what Standing (2012) has defined as the 'precariat': a class that sits below the working class because they exist in conditions of extreme insecurity of life in general and employment in particular. Worse still is if they exist in Standing's (2012) other social category defined as the '*lumpenprecariat*, victims of being in the precariat who have fallen out of even that group into social illnesses, drug addiction and chronic anomie, listless, passive, waiting to die' (original italics, 589). Thus, it is my contention that while we should support alternative educational provision, we must work to address the fundamentally socially unjust ideologies that are driving government policies – including those in education - towards greater social and economic inequalities. Although there is value in having diverse educational providers, the danger is that the very existence of flexible learning options for those deemed to be 'disengaged'

allows mainstream schools to abrogate their responsibility to educate children from all backgrounds regardless of how 'challenging'.

For such young people disengagement as resistance to adult authority quickly evolves to being 'at risk' and in need of control and/or various kinds of psychological and educational remediation. As Zyngier (2008, 1771) observes:

> Where engagement is defined (narrowly) as willingness to become involved in teacher initiated tasks and at the same time is separated from the students' socio-political and cultural contexts, we find that if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible, but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student.

Current research identifies strong links between the neoliberal project and the 'therapisation' (Brunila 2014) of young people experiencing life challenges. Furedi, (2004, 8), for example, notes that 'the language of emotional deficit pervades education' and Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) point to rising societal preoccupations with 'therapeutic' solutions to everyday challenges along with moral panics in many western countries about 'crises' in youthful mental health and emotional problems. Brunila (2014) argues that such trends are encouraging a 'pathologising' of young people as they struggle to cope with the socio-economic challenges created by neoliberalism. She notes:

> What sociologists define as a "therapeutic ethos", where the language of disorder, addiction, vulnerability and dysfunction together with associated practices from different branches of therapy permeate both culture and political systems, is now prevalent in an increasing number of countries including the United States, Australia, Canada and EU member states … education seems to be finding a new role as a therapeutic entity employing therapeutic interventions, and is legitimised by finding the '"real truth" about young people in therapeutic terms … It provides legitimation for shaping young people and others as more economically productive subjects (Brunila 2014, 9-19).

Data from the research project upon which this paper draws reveal that there were many teaching staff who shared the view that individual pathologies lie behind schooling disengagement. Parallel to this, however, was a counter-narrative from youth workers who echoed the theoretical positions noted above. The next section presents contrasts these views from the field.

'Precarious pathways' and marginalised young people

The research context

The data presented in this section have been derived from a larger research project (2012-2014) exploring the quality and availability of alternative educational provision across one Australian State. The alternative education sector in Australia is developing in a variety of models, parallel to and largely independent of mainstream schools. Some are run by charities and others by community and youth services; some receive a modest level of financial support from the government but all face challenges in terms of catering to their growing wait-lists. These are not special education sites[2]; rather, they cater to a broad range of disadvantaged and marginalised youth who for a variety of reasons have left or been expelled from mainstream high schools. The large geographical area of the state creates problems of educational access for young people who live in rural, remote and very remote regions.

We visited eight alternative education sites representing urban, rural and remote regions of the state and utilised qualitative methodologies including 102 face-to-face interviews: 51 teachers and youth workers in alternative schools and 51 of their students. We also conducted 14 telephone interviews with youth workers in a variety of contexts; and 20 telephone interviews with mainstream teachers whose duties included student management, welfare and behaviour. Our selection criteria for teachers and workers included: geographic diversity across the state; appropriate qualifications for their responsibilities; and industry registration. Field observations, field notes, photographs, and school and student documents and artefacts also formed part of our data.

As the study drew to a close we identified a number of themes for separate analysis; one of these serves the purpose of this paper; specifically, adult professionals' perceptions of young people who disengage from mainstream schooling. For this analysis I draw upon selections of data[3] from 19 conversations with youth workers from a variety of sites and 21 teaching staff whose duties also involved management of student behaviour and welfare [4] in mainstream high schools. Due to the extensive available data, the best representative examples have been used here to exemplify particular themes. In choosing to work with the voices of our professional participants in this paper, I am not seeking to silence student participants. They are represented elsewhere. The key issue explored in the following section

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[2] In Australia this categorisation relates to learning needs related to physical and cognitive impairments
[3] Pseudonyms are used for the names of all places and participants, for reasons of privacy and confidentiality
[4] Referred to in this section as 'teaching staff'

pertains to the ways in which oppositional narratives have been appropriated by two different groups of adult professionals to answer the question - *What are the causes of student disengagement?* Couldry (2010) argues that 'voice matters' but in the neoliberal landscape of contemporary western societies, some voices cut through more easily than others, particularly those that endorse currently dominant notions of the primacy of competitive, entrepreneurial individualism. By contrasting the voices of two different groups of professionals working with young people, I wish to problematize the currently common deficit constructions of young people who fail to thrive in mainstream educational contexts.

'The mentoring program addresses students' poverty of the mind[5]'…

As evidenced by this heading taken from a publically available state government website, official responses to youthful disengagement reveal a commonly held view that the root causes may be found within the individual. This perception was reflected strongly in the data derived from the interviews with teaching staff which I shall outline first.

Within the teaching staff data there were frequent allusions to mental health issues that were deemed to be 'on the rise'. Typical attitudes and responses are here represented:

> Gavin (guidance officer, metropolitan high school): The mental health one is a big one. So they might have severe anxiety or they might have depression or something like that. Sometimes it's not treated; sometimes it is treated by a psychologist, GP or psychiatrist.

> Sandy (behaviour specialist, state department): Apathy, victimhood, co-dependency, a whole lot of issues that stop a young person from even wanting to start to want to achieve. And how do we work with them? The first one is to address the healing for a young person. I think it's critically important for anyone who is doing work in this area to really understand the neurophysiology of trauma and what's happening for young people. Often, we can give all the assistance but if it doesn't address the actual impaired hardware of the brain - the actual neurophysiological structures that they have built in response to trauma.

Additionally, the perceived mental health issues of 'disengaged' young people were frequently couched within discourses of family dysfunction and a lack of valuing of education:

> Evan (head of welfare, rural high school): A lot of our kids don't have the best home life. The ones that are disengaging are the ones that come from broken homes; homes where parents, you know, haven't worked, their parents haven't worked, so there is

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[5] Description of 'disengaged' sourced from a state government website

not that culture of wanting to be successful to go out on get a good job. There's not a huge emphasis on education.

Such judgements featured strongly in schools with high numbers of Indigenous students:

> Phil (student mentor, regional high school): In my previous school in north-west [Australian State], with a high Indigenous population, I found there was a lot of disengagement and dropping out of school early with a family history that mum/dad has never worked and granddad has never worked, "And I'm not going to get a job either, so there's no point in going to school". These guys come from families that drink all night and party all night.

These criticisms of the family lives of some young people echo 'underclass' theories in mid-1990s, Britain (Murray 1994), which demonized the poor as being welfare-dependent; morally irresponsible; anti-social; anti-education; generationally unemployed and likely to become involved in crime. Although such conservative analyses were comprehensively critiqued in subsequent years, the tendency to blame whole demographics for their socio-economic circumstances remains.

Other common factors of disengagement noted by teaching staff included: drug use, behavioural and learning difficulties and lifestyle problems relating to sleep, diet and the use of social media. The following observation by guidance officer Gavin (regional, small town high school) conflates these factors linking them to mental health:

> Poor parenting, poor sleep hygiene, poor diet and social media. Those are the four things that I think are really impacting on kids and their mental health and also their attendance at school. Each one of those four things contributes to them not attending school and developing mental health illnesses.

Apart from student welfare officer and teacher, Bryan from a small country high school, who noted that 'a lot of them are coming from generational poverty', only one other interviewee from teaching staff participants mentioned poverty explicitly as being a key factor *shaping* all of the issues they saw as fostering student disengagement. The other teacher was Vivienne who also worked in student welfare in another rural high school:

> [More] kids are struggling with basic needs and schools don't seem to understand stuff like that. The school uniform might be bought in Year 8 and you are expected to wear it right through until Year 11, even if it's got a hole in it. Other teachers are going, "Your uniform looks terrible. Get home and get another one." They don't actually understand that there's no money to get another one. So there's a lack of understanding of poverty. A lot of teachers didn't understand how to form relationships; didn't understand about kids who have backgrounds of poverty or trauma and why they disengage.

While this realisation was not voiced by the majority of teaching staff participants, youth workers interviewed for this study shared this deeper understanding of the social and economic pressures shaping the lives of young people today and consequently their engagement with schools. Commonly, youth workers asserted that schools often 'gave up' on young people whose behaviour became too challenging and this led to downward spirals of disengagement, non-attendance and/or conflict.

This more nuanced understanding of the significance of schooling disengagement was evidenced strongly in the data from youth worker participants. Meagan, a youth support coordinator at a high school in a regional city cited contextual challenges:

> For me, [it is] homelessness, or invisible homelessness and family change … If I am looking at the school side of it, I would have to say the transport issue … They need to take two busses to get to school … that's also a financial issue.

Working in a major metropolitan area, youth development officer, Candice, highlighted the significance of community in facilitating solutions for marginalised youth:

> I find the better supported a young person is within their community, the more likely they are to re-engage with school, or to not entirely drop out in the first place. So building those links between schools and community organisations, and service organisations, and obviously having funding for youth organisations is important.

As with teaching staff, when youth workers were asked about the causes of student disengagement they also noted family breakdown, drug use and mental health problems as being key factors; however, unlike teaching staff, they *primarily* framed these factors within the context of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. Youth workers appeared to see poverty as being an *initiating* and fundamental cause of issues leading to disengagement. Examples include the following:

> Anette (major city youth service): I can probably only say when we do an assessment of a young person, we identify barriers. Basically it's poverty.

> Aidan (youth and community services, remote area of the state): Most of these [mostly Indigenous] young people come from very marginalised, disadvantaged backgrounds.

Several youth workers pointed to the broader economic contexts that were shaping youthful attitudes to work and education, as noted by youth development officer, Jake: 'There is a lack of opportunities outside of schooling and declining availability of employment in our region'. This was also noted by Sophie a director of a regional neighbourhood centre in a rural town:

Because of the downturn in employment prospects here, because the coal price has dropped and [because of] the drought they haven't been hiring those basic skilled workers which is where lots of the young people [fit].

Sophie also identified rural isolation and transport are significant problems for young people, particularly for those with a 'reputation': 'We don't have public transport. So they have got to do a deal with the school bus driver. Sometimes the bus driver will let them on and sometimes he won't. So it's quite sporadic'.

Lara, from a youth organisation in a coastal region noted the negative attitudes of communities towards marginalised young people and pointed to environmental factors shaping their disengagement:

I think there's a lot of judgment about why kids aren't at school and why they are walking the streets. People just look down their noses at these kids whereas they are usually just a product of their environment.

Such are the 'kids' who usually find their way to flexible learning options in Australia. However, the demand for educational choices outside of mainstream institutions has increased to the point whereby the alternative sector has had to become more selective, creating a third tier of young people who have nowhere to go; those at the so-called 'pointy end'. Experienced, senior youth officer, Marlee, worked in a large regional town. She argued that some flexible learning centres were becoming more 'choosy' about the young people they accepted, making it harder for the most desperate to find a place: '[The flexible learning centre] has changed. When I first started in the sector it would take all of the young people who had dropped out. Now it is much more particular about the young people that they take'. Voicing the concerns of many youth workers, Marlee also expressed frustration about Government cuts to youth welfare agencies and programs:

The money's gone. Bear with me if I get teary, because I am so angry about this. There are no youth job placement agencies where kids can go and hang out and start building relationships with people that they trust. There were three/four of them in town before all of that funding got pulled.

Finally, Marlee passionately explained her view on the clash between the expectations of mainstream schools and the lived realities of young people experiencing socio-economic hardship:

They [homeless young people] have got nowhere stable to stay. They don't have any money to get school uniforms. It is not actually compulsory to wear school uniforms anywhere in legislation, and yet schools are saying, "Unless you have a uniform, you can't be here." I actually had [a poster] in my office - *Don't let school get in the way*

of a good education. We had a few teachers who had some issues about that because they thought I was undermining everything. All I'm saying is we need to change our thinking about school.

What my data reveal is a fundamental difference between teaching staff and youth workers in terms of how they viewed the apparent problem of schooling disengagement. While both groups witnessed similar issues (e.g. family breakdown, mental ill health, drug abuse etc.), youth workers tended to view these as *symptoms* of the underlying poverty that was the fundamental cause of marginalisation and disadvantage and, consequently also, schooling disengagement. In contrast, teaching staff mostly constructed the 'symptoms' as the *primary causes* of disengagement thus reinforcing neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility for success or failure and related notions of deficit youth.

Conclusion

Neoliberal capitalism is the prime globalising force creating highly adverse conditions for the poor and marginalised who have few resources for coping with the increased risks associated with unstable – 'precarious' - economic conditions (Beck 2009). Shrinking welfare in high need areas of health, housing and education have exacerbated their challenges, giving rise to new social classes that sit below the traditional working class. Those in the 'precariat' and 'lumpenprecariat' (Standing 2012) struggle to survive the unpredictability of a neo-laissez-faire capitalist system. The currently dominant neoliberal framing of education policies within the global North has encouraged a meritocratic view of education that constructs failure as the responsibility of the individual (Bauman 2001). It therefore follows that if some young people appear 'disengaged' reasons are sought within the psyche of the individual rather than within educational institutions or the broader social and economic systems that shape them (Brunila 2014). Students who fail to conform to traditional disciplinary and academic standards are thus deemed to be in need of various combinations of punishment and/or therapy; *they* become 'the problem': maladjusted; badly parented; anxiety-riven; drugs-dependent; illiterate and innumerate; rebellious; apathetic and hopeless (Finn, Nybell and Shook 2010). Such young people are deemed to be 'at risk' / 'a risk' (Giroux 2009; Grossberg 2005) needing to be 'fixed' so that they can join the system and make a contribution to national economic well-being: they must be 'earning or learning' or risk being cut loose from welfare safety nets as further punishment for their *personal failure* to make it in the free market economy.

From a social justice perspective, it is concerning that teaching staff participants in this study largely favoured individualised psycho-medical and psycho-social explanations for the problematic behaviour and schooling disengagement of their students. Clearly, there are some young people who do require medical and/or psychological intervention; however, the *reasons* for their conditions must be interrogated within the contexts of unjust socio-economic conditions shaping young lives. It is unacceptable to suggest individual deficit with labels of 'disengaged', a term which implies personal failure to embrace schooling. Such attitudes stand in contrast to the perspectives of the youth worker participants whose interpretations of the same behavioural trends foreground the social and economic contexts of young people as fundamental to the witnessed phenomena. It is my view that one reason for this difference lies in the reorientation of schools towards greater measurement and accountability regimes and the associated pressures upon teachers 'to perform' and to produce the desired student outcomes which will enhance the reputation (and hence competitive edge) of the school (Lingard et al. 2013).

These significantly different perspectives also suggest the need for a review of teacher education in respect of how current programs promulgate understandings of the various impacts of socio-economic and cultural factors on student engagement. Currently, there is a trial being undertaken by one Australian university to address this issue by targeting promising pre-service teachers and providing intensive training in this area (see NETDS 2015); however, given current concerns about levels of student disengagement, it is clear that more needs to be done within the sector. It is not my intention here to undervalue the significant work being done in flexible/ alternative education sites and programs in Australia and elsewhere. I have spoken to numerous young people whose lives have been transformed and, indeed, saved by the 'second chance' at learning and life provided by the staff in such places. However, it is *not* acceptable for mainstream institutions to expel the 'waste' (Bauman 2004) from the system in the form of young people deemed to be 'beyond hope'; an attitude all too common and summed up here by a teacher in a rural school who condemns one of her seventeen year old students to the rubbish heap of life: 'He's got no motivation or anything and will probably go nowhere with his life'.

The world economies divide along a North/South axis of inequality and within individual nation states the gap between the wealthiest citizens and the most disadvantaged continues to widen (de Block and Buckingham 2010). Within such contexts, the least powerful, particularly young people from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds, often become caught in the crossfire of societal changes over which they have no control; they are

indeed 'collateral damage' (Bauman 2011). Yet, in a real war of military proportions we would not define the wounds of battle to be of the individual's own making; we would recognise anxiety and mental illness as likely symptoms of the conflict rather than individual deficiencies. Thus it is inherent upon us to redefine the problem of youthful disengagement by recognising the plethora of individual failings and pathologies attributed to such young people as *also* being symptoms of neoliberal social and economic 'wars' of attrition against the marginalised and powerless. Trying to 'fix' young people, one 'patient' at a time will not stop 'the war'; will not remediate the increasingly unjust society that unchecked neoliberal capitalism ultimately creates; will not stop growing numbers of young people who, rather than being stereotyped as 'disengaged', should be deemed 'disenfranchised'.

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