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RE-ASSERTING THE PLACE OF CONTEXT IN EXPLAINING STUDENT (UNDER)ACHIEVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

One popular view of student achievement is that the quality of teaching students receive plays an important part in whether or not they do well at school. In this article we draw attention to 'context' as a complementary explanation, particularly regarding achievement differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. In making these observations, we utilise data from one Australian secondary school located in an economically depressed rural community. Drawing on the insights of Bourdieu, our focus is on the broader social and economic influences that can adversely position students and schools, as well as work to inform the institutional stance that schools take in relation to their students.

Keywords

RE-ASSERTING THE PLACE OF CONTEXT IN EXPLAINING STUDENT (UNDER)ACHIEVEMENT

INTRODUCTION

This article acknowledges contemporary claims that improving the quality of teaching is central to 'fixing' student under-achievement. Our argument engages with these claims only in passing. We are more interested in drawing attention to factoring back in 'external constraints', which Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 10) suggest deserve 'epistemological priority … [over] subjectivist understanding'. That is, it is not just that students from low socio-economic backgrounds (who are most strongly associated with low academic achievement) have limited access to high quality teaching; students from other socio-economic backgrounds can do as well. Rather, our point is that the broader social and economic influences that can adversely *position* students and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the way that this positioning works to inform the *stances* that schools take in relation to their students, mean that schooling has less to offer them.

Educational disadvantage has long been a matter of interest in OECD nations, at least since the 1970s. Then, 'educational disadvantage was seen as something that needed to be compensated for [either through the provision of additional resources, remedial classes or through 'equal opportunity' provisions] but not eliminated' (Teese 2006, 1). More recently, 'there has been a greater emphasis on student learning outcomes' (Teese 2006, 1), irrespective of socio-economic status. As noted, one current popular view of student achievement, fuelled by teacher effectiveness literature, is that the quality of teaching that students receive plays an important part in whether or not students do well at school (as much as their abilities allow). Certainly there is research (eg. Newmann et al. 1996; Lingard et al. 2001) confirming what others might regard as self-evident: that good teaching makes a difference. However, this is different from suggesting that teachers are *the* difference with respect to student outcomes, which appears to be the conclusion that some have drawn from this (and other) research. To think such things is to believe in universal social laws, divorced from the constraints of any specific context (Seddon 1995).

An editorial in a New Zealand newspaper captures well this neoconservative reading: 'the obvious point is that it is quality teachers who make the difference' (in Nash and Prochnow 2004, 187). This is

the assumption that informed the proposal by Mark Latham (then leader of the Australian Labor Party) at the 2004 Australian Federal election: to address student under-achievement by transferring 'good' teachers (those whose students achieve high academic outcomes) into under-performing schools. It is also the thinking that informed Julie Bishop's (Australian Minister for Education, 2004-2007) push to introduce performance pay for 'good' teachers (determined on the basis of student outcomes), as a way of lifting student achievement. The current Australian Labor Government has also moved down a similar path by introducing rewards for quality teachers under the new Quality Teaching National Partnership.

However, in this article we begin from a different premise. That is:

> In the face of all the evidence, it is unrealistic to expect that the attainment of middle-class and working-class families can be equalized, as some speakers within this broad discourse assert, as a result of pedagogic action by the school. (Nash and Prochnow 2004, 189)

Our intention is to draw attention to the context of students' schooling as one complementary explanation for students' academic achievement, particularly with regard to the achievement differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. While we acknowledge that these arguments are by no means new, we work from the premise that context is being overlooked by some who attribute student achievement solely to what teachers do. Indeed, as Whitty (1997) points out, much educational research remains decontextualised. Whitty (1997, 156) reminds us of Gerald Grace's (1991) observation that 'too often … the "bigger picture" is not entirely ignored but alluded to in … "contextual rhetoric" at the beginning of a book or paper and then forgotten'. Our analysis, however, offers an important alternative to dominant discourses with a renewed emphasis on the social and economic contexts in which students and schools are located. By 'context' we mean not only students' 'immediate, lived experience' (of teaching, for example) but also 'the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 10-11). While some school effectiveness research 'bleaches context from its analytic frame' (Slee and Weiner 1998, 5), we are of the view that external (social and economic) constraints provide important explanations of student achievement.

To disconnect these two moments of analysis (as is the approach of some teacher effectiveness research) would involve disregarding 'the intrinsically double reality of the social world' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 11). And by drawing attention to context we mean not just an account of students' backgrounds as a backdrop to their everyday experiences (Seddon 1995), but more centrally as the thing about which students' experiences speak and which speak to students' experiences. That is, we view context as constitutive of the object of study. In Seddon's (1995) terms, we seek to emphasise that context is:

> a lived reality which impinges on the participants of schooling as a quite tangible force ... Context is no longer something simple and taken for granted, a backdrop to whatever is important. It is palpable and present. It is forced to the front of educators' attention and is central to their lived experience. (Seddon 1995, 401)

RESEARCH DESIGN

The unit of our analysis is one Australian secondary school and its students, *and* their particular location in an economically depressed rural town and community. We make no claim that our case school is representative of all schools in such circumstances. Indeed, like Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody (2006), we would challenge studies that homogenise such places and the people within them. We do claim, however, that each school is framed by its circumstances and that these matter in the schooling students receive. The particular town in which our school is located was established early in the twentieth century to service the local mine, which closed around a decade ago. Reputed to have been the richest mine of its type in the world, its success extended far beyond the community, with its wealth also stimulating the growth of nearby regional towns. Having provided work for tens of thousands over its lifetime, the economy of the town became dependent upon the continuance of mining. As a small district that had relied primarily on a single financial source, the long-term downturn of mining in this community has led to economic jeopardy. Since the mine's closure, the community has experienced considerable economic depression and a high proportion of its residents are now unemployed. Described at the time of our research as the most socio-economically disadvantaged town in its state, it had the state's highest unemployment level (22.3%)

and the nation's fifth-highest ratio of welfare dependency: for every 100 wage and salary earners, there were 175 recipients of unemployment benefits, disability support, parenting payment or the aged pension.

Enrolments at the school vary between 220 and 255 in any one year. Seventy-five percent of the schools' students live in the town; the remainder are from surrounding rural areas. Approximately 28% have been identified as having learning difficulties and 2.4% have been ascertained as 'Intellectually Impaired'. There is also a significant Indigenous population (24% of students). Like many disadvantaged schools, the school has difficulty attracting and retaining high ability teachers, instead relying on a high turnover of often reluctant staff who are sent (or feel compelled) to fill positions unable to be resourced through teacher choice programs. Overlaying this is a general lack of experience of the entire staff. At the time of the research, the staff profile included four first-year teachers, a Deputy Principal who had been in the position for ten weeks, and a Head of Department who was also a first-year teacher. There were few mentors for staff other than the Principal and the second, slightly more experienced, Head of Department, who was responsible for the induction program for first-year staff. These are significant conditions faced by many schools serving socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

To illustrate the case, we draw on data from 23 semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents and students from the school community (although not all are directly quoted). It is a purposive rather than a random sample; a mixture of teachers, parents and students differentiated by such attributes as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), involvement in schooling, and levels of academic achievement. While the interviews were conducted over a three month period, we worked closely with the school for approximately one year to develop relationships with the school community that we believe optimised the authenticity and quality of accounts. Following the completion of interviews, recordings were converted to text for ease of manipulation and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992). To preserve their anonymity, differentiation between participants is indicated in this article by their position in the field (teacher, parent, student) and by number (for example, Teacher # 17).

We locate their comments within changing social and economic contexts. Specifically, educational and post-school prospects for young people from low socio-economic backgrounds – particularly Indigenous young people and those from rural areas – are poor, and social inequalities are growing at an alarming rate. Labour market restructuring coupled with a lack of demand in the youth labour market have made employment precarious and unemployment and welfare dependency a reality. In addition, industrial relations reforms introduced by the nation's conservative government at the time have led to less secure working conditions across Australia generally. Students living in such contexts are less likely to complete school or see higher education as relevant to life and employment.

What follows comprises a brief rehearsal of the well known association between students' (low) SES and (low) achievement in Australian education; one that is exacerbated when it converges with rurality. We then proceed to locate our case school within these broader issues. Through a dual exploration of the broader social and economic influences that can adversely position students and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds, and the way that this positioning works to inform the stances that schools take in relation to their students, we argue for factoring back in the broader and specific contexts of students' schooling as one complementary explanation for students' academic achievement.

MERITOCRACY PROBLEMATISED: THE INFLUENCE OF LOW SES ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

In Australia, as in most OECD nations, education (particularly schooling) has traditionally been regarded as the mechanism through which the 'poorer classes' are able to redress their low SES. Indeed, most Australian States (led by the State of Victoria) introduced its citizens to compulsory schooling in the mid to late 1800s with the promise of a better life for graduates, albeit also for employers seeking a more and differently educated workforce. (See also Raymond Williams' 1961 account of the resolution of these competing influences at the introduction of mass schooling in England.) Hence, 'with mass schooling, so it was thought, everyone was given an opportunity for social improvement, and for access to power and privilege which only a few in society had hitherto enjoyed' (Taylor et al. 1997, 126).

For the most part, this egalitarian view of education as the great social (and economic) equaliser needs to be problematised while hidden dynamics and processes of exclusion that underserve specific categories of students are explored further. Since the introduction of compulsory schooling, low student achievement has been highly correlated with low SES. For example, Teese et al. (2006) note that in 2004 nearly two-thirds of low achievers completing the Victorian Certificate of Education (the qualification that students in their final year of secondary schooling seek in Victoria, Australia) came from low SES backgrounds, while two-thirds of high achievers came from high to very high SES backgrounds.

Similarly, the Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER: the 'score' allocated to Victorian students on the basis of their final secondary school results and used to select between those applying for university entry) is consistently associated with socio-economic background, such that low SES students have lower ENTERs compared to students from wealthier backgrounds (Teese 2000; Teese and Polesel 2003). It is not surprising, then, that students from low SES backgrounds are under-represented in higher education generally – at 14.55% of the university student population in Australia compared with 25% of all students (DEST 2007) – and, specifically, are under-represented in Australia's elite Group of Eight universities (the equivalent of the Russell Group in the UK or the Ivy League in the USA) and in those disciplines closest to what Bourdieu (1988) describes as the fields of social and economic power.

This association between students' (low) SES and (low) achievement is a consistent theme in Australian education, not simply explained away as misrepresentations associated with focusing on one (Australian) system and not simply a feature of contemporary times. For example, while Australian school students as a group (compared to most of their counterparts in other advanced economies) perform extremely well on international PISA tests in literacy and numeracy (OECD 2004), Barry McGaw (the immediate past Director of the Directorate for Education in the OECD) (2006a) notes that the gap between high and low achieving Australian students is among the highest in OECD countries, with low achievers overwhelmingly characterised by their low SES.[i] Moreover, McGaw (2006b) suggests that in Australia, 70 per cent of the variation in the educational outcomes between schools can be accounted for in terms of differences in the social backgrounds of their

students – 40 per cent individual social background and 30 per cent the average social background of students in the schools (or 'the company they keep'). In Australian universities, the under-representation of low SES students has not altered significantly since the early 1990s (Bradley et al. 2008) when these students were first identified as an 'equity group' in higher education and became the target of programs aimed at increasing their enrolment (DEET 1990; Gale & McNamee 1994; 1995).

It would be difficult to read such broad scale data without concluding that schooling does not simply reward able students. Indeed, Teese et al.'s (2006, 18) reading of this data is that, 'achievement differences are the means through which social disadvantage is relayed'. However, the apparently meritocratic basis for schooling, particularly as this is encountered at local sites, tends to mask the social and economic roots of under-achievement (Young 2006). It is so endemic that some suggest that the 'best advice we can give to a poor child keen to get ahead through education is to choose richer parents' (Connell 1993, 22). In the Australian context, rurality and low SES together combine to produce the greatest educational disadvantage, prevailing against completion of schooling and entry to higher education and affecting the development of post-school aspirations and expectations of young people (Alloway et al. 2004; James et al. 1999). With their significant under-representation in post-compulsory education, the evidence suggests that:

> individuals' chances of going to university in Australia are still determined by their geographical locations and the social stratum to which their families belong. Despite the mushrooming growth in higher education and the overall expansion in access throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, regional and social imbalances in higher education participation appear strongly resistant to change. (James et al. 1999, 4-5)

LOCATING ONE SECONDARY SCHOOL WITHIN THESE BROADER ISSUES

One way in which to think about the influence of these broader constraints on student achievement is in terms of positions and stances. Bourdieu refers to the social contexts in which individuals act as 'fields', 'markets' and 'games': that is, 'structured space[s] of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or "capital"' (Thompson

1991, 13-14). The volume and structure of capital (economic, cultural and social) possessed by individuals determines their position in a field and these positions 'interact with habitus to produce different *postures* (*prises de position*)' (Mahar, Harker and Wilkes 1990, 8, emphasis original), or stances.

As action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between an individual's thought and activity and the objective world, individuals endowed with an equivalent overall capital can differ in their stances. Concomitantly, similar dispositions can generate very different, sometimes opposing, stances depending on the structure of the field (Bourdieu 1991). Hence Bourdieu suggests that positions and stances are inseparable, so much so that they warrant simultaneous analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Thinking this way suggests the necessity of a dual exploration of:

(i) the broader social and economic influences that can adversely position students from low socio-economic backgrounds and the schools they attend; and

(ii) the way that this positioning works to inform the stances that schools take in relation to their students.

We consider each of the above in turn.

Positioning students

The broader social and economic influences in this context can adversely position students from low SES backgrounds in a number of ways. Perhaps most apparent is the way that students are positioned without resources.

Without resources

The SES of many of those in the town in which the school is located creates problems that adversely influence students' schooling. These issues include: hunger – 'they come to school and they haven't eaten since the day before' (Teacher # 17); homelessness – 'We have many students who … haven't

lived with … a parent since they were five or six' (Principal), some 'wander the streets at night' (Teacher # 17); and financial hardship – 'sometimes kids don't have books and stuff like that 'cause their parents can't afford it' (Teacher # 17). For many students, 'just to get to the door [of the school] is a major feat' (Principal). As one teacher observed, 'some of the kids come from horrific backgrounds' (Teacher # 16). Another teacher commented that some students 'come to school and they haven't eaten since the day before … That's pretty common … [or] they haven't been home for two days' (Teacher # 17).

Even for those whose basic requirements of food and shelter are met, the limited disposable income of their parents can make it difficult to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. As one teacher recounted, 'you go into some of the [students'] houses and there's not a book anywhere to be seen, there's not a newspaper … so there's no back-up material for kids' (Teacher # 18). Another teacher spoke about how she tries to make up for her students' limited resources:

> I carry a very big pencil case [for] those that don't have pens or pencils … There's also a resource hire scheme. Now if your [parents] don't pay that … by the cut-off date … half-way through the year [the school] go through [the list of students] and take these textbooks off the kids … I was in this classroom … [in which] they had all their books taken off them and I thought, 'This is useless. What are we going to do?' … And I thought about it and I said, 'Well they can't have textbooks, [but] I can have textbooks.' So I then went to the library and got about 12 of these books … I borrowed them in my name and I took them back … at the end of the lesson … That's what I do now … So you get to know what they need and … you find your own ways to make it easier. (Teacher # 21)

Clearly illustrated here is the way in which the institutional habitus of the school can work against students' access to resources, how teachers are positioned in this and the stances that are available to them; what they can and cannot do. It is not simply that students in such schools lack resources. It is also about how schools structure the learning environment and the spaces available within this for teachers to act in students' interests.

The socio-economic circumstances of students' families can also mean that they miss out on opportunities to be involved in extra-curricular activities. As one student told us:

> We're fundraising because we've got an all-girls soccer team … and we've got no transport to get [to the nearby regional city] … We had to pull out [of the competition after one game] this term because we had no transport. (Student # 25)

As with the classroom example, it is important to note how resource issues are positioned as the responsibility of individuals (students, parents, teachers, etc) rather than systems, which are structured in ways that require individuals to provide these resources in order for them to participate. The issue is not so much the resources themselves (even though additional resources are always welcome in disadvantaged communities), but the ways in which systems (such as schools, sporting competitions, etc) are structured to require them. The connection between under-resourcing and failure seems to be built into the system. Indeed, stories related to the adverse positioning of students as a result of their low socio-economic backgrounds are common in the school. To take just one illustration among many, consider the mother of thirteen (five of whom live at home and attend the school) who struggles with the costs of her children's education. Resourcing their activities at school is all but beyond her capacities. For instance:

> … they learn cooking. A lot of students can't really afford the cooking … School is expensive ... If you've more than one child at school you're ... finding it very, very hard … I mean, let's face it, the price of books is ridiculous … Then you've got their costs in their travels [for excursions] … Or if they're placed in a job placement you might have to find transport [to the nearby regional city] for them … But if you can't do it your kid is going to miss out. And a lot of times you really want to get hold of the government and the schools … and strangle them because it's so very hard for a child to do school nowadays. It's going back to [the days when] some could go to school and some couldn't. (Parent # 24)

In contexts such as this, where social and economic influences can work to position students without resources, considerable adjustments need to be made to counteract the adverse impact of material

poverty on students' academic achievement. Again, it is not simply about giving these families more money. It is also about how schooling is arranged in ways that require this money and how money is positioned as the only or main resource. In this equation, those without money are bereft of all resources, which is clearly a false economy of disadvantaged communities.

Without hope or purpose; without a working future

Context also positions students in this community without hope or purpose; without a working future. The students are very conscious of their town's economic vulnerability and know that it will be difficult to obtain employment in the town after they graduate. Even though educational qualifications are viewed by many as a proven way of accessing more secure, well-paid jobs within national labour markets (see, for example, Ainley and McKenzie 1999; McClelland, Macdonald and MacDonald 1998), there tends to be disillusionment, especially among older students, about the real value of schooling, given the lack of employment opportunities in the community. Indicative of this, rural and remote areas consistently demonstrate low retention rates in schools and higher numbers of early school leavers (Kenyon et al. 2001). For example, in 2005, the case-study school's retention rate (Year 12 enrolment as a percentage of the Year 8 cohort) was 58% while for the State as a whole, it was 75% for boys and 85% for girls.

During our study, the Principal suggested that after leaving school, roughly 2% or 3% of the students planned to continue their education at a tertiary institution, some (a slightly larger group) planned to seek employment, while many others intended to apply for unemployment benefits. Indeed, the lack of employment opportunities in the community seemed to play on the minds of students, impacting on their aspirations for the future:

> There are some kids up here who are second, third or even ... fourth or fifth generation unemployed … and they don't see a lot of activity around the place … there's not a lot of inspiration. They can't look out the window and see something going on like you can [in the nearby regional city where] ... you've got the industrial park and ... the [large industrial company] … So there's … nothing here for them to say, 'That's where I'd like to work'. (Teacher # 18)

Similarly, a lack of occupational models in rural communities means that students have fewer images from which to draw in envisioning what they might become (Alloway et al. 2004). These factors also affect the value students place on schooling. As one parent pointed out, the town:

> is so small and there's not [many] job opportunities at all here when they leave [school]. Already you know [some of them are] just going to sit at home … on [unemployment benefits] … And there's always, 'Why should we go to school? It's not going to get us anything.' (Parent # 22)

Teachers also noticed that 'sometimes the kids just can't be bothered to do anything so that's why they don't do well. They haven't got the motivation to try' (Teacher # 19). Another teacher spoke of two Year 11 boys who were in her class in the previous year:

> [After they] dropped out [of school] ... I would see them walking around the streets … drunk or sniffing glue at 11 o'clock in the morning, doing absolutely nothing with their lives but they're not in school either. I worry about kids like that … I guess … they couldn't see any end in sight. (Teacher # 22)

Much of the research suggests that students' willingness to continue with education is diminished by limited local employment opportunities or perceived poor future employment prospects (Black et al. 2000; Kenyon et al. 2001; Lupton 2006). Similarly, James et al. (1999) note that rural students are significantly less likely than urban students to believe that a university course will offer them the chance of an interesting and rewarding career and significantly more likely to believe that there is no point in going to university.

As one teacher recounted:

> In some cases … nobody in the family sees value in education so [the students] don't see any value in education … [I asked one of the students], 'What are you gonna do when you leave

school?' He said, 'I'll stay home, go on [unemployment benefits]' … I found out that granddad and dad had both worked in the mine and had been [dismissed from work] … and they all lived in this one big house, grandma and granddad and mum and dad and about four or five kids … and they were all collecting various types of social security and nobody had bothered to do anything else. (Teacher # 18)

While we do not condone or concur with the deficit discourses espoused by this particular teacher, the research literature suggests that students in rural contexts – and especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – are more likely to experience little family or community encouragement to continue with their education (Alloway et al. 2004; James et al. 1999). While some rural Australians are not necessarily convinced of the value of post-compulsory education for their children – particularly when such education is likely to involve student relocation and additional financial burdens (Alloway et al. 2004; James et al. 1999; Kenyon et al. 2001) – 'nor are they necessarily aware of the way in which changes in the world of work and in rural economies have given an added urgency to the need for young people to acquire skills and qualifications' (Alloway et al. 2004, 30).

Instead, people in rural areas and from low SES backgrounds can feel constrained by their circumstances; a disposition that seems to reproduce these constraints. Indeed, many appear largely incapable of perceiving social reality, in all of its arbitrariness, as anything other than 'the way things are' (Jenkins 2002). In despair, they take themselves and their social world for granted. As Wilson (1987, 57) points out, in a community such as this 'with the overwhelming majority of families having spells of long-term joblessness' we find that 'other alternatives such as welfare … are not only increasingly relied on, they come to be seen as a way of life'. Noel Pearson (in Grasswill 2002) has made similar comments about the attitudes of many of his Indigenous community (on the York Peninsula in Northern Queensland, Australia); that they have been kept in dependency by often well-meaning welfare schemes.

In the school environment, then:

Some [students] don't see the reason why they should try. They go home to parents who don't work … because of ... the high unemployment rate. They're not seeing anything worthwhile in education; they're not seeing what education can do for them … We've got students … [who are] just there because they [have] nowhere else to go. (Teacher # 16)

The broader social and economic influences can induce an atmosphere of hopelessness. Irrespective of how well students do at school, it doesn't overcome the reality of limited employment opportunities in the town. For many, their poverty 'imposes itself on them with a necessity so total that it allows them no glimpse of a reasonable exit' (Bourdieu 1979, 61). Hence, like the lads in Willis' ethnographic study of working-class boys in industrial England of the 1970s, students 'understand schools as out of touch with their lived experiences and irrelevant to their future lives' (Nolan and Anyon 2004, 144). And they reject school culture because they see through the myth of meritocracy. In this way, they play an active role in their own class reproduction, even as they engage in resistant practices.

Such practices are also gendered. Kenway et al.'s (2006) notion of melancholic masculinity helps to explain the feelings of failure, hopelessness and anger experienced by some young men in this and similar contexts. Enduring intergenerational underemployment and demonstrating loyalty to their fathers, these boys are inhibited in their ability to engage with the imperatives of the new work order and changing labour markets by adopting a more reflexive and mobile form of masculinity.

It is this narrow imagination – that the single function of schooling is to provide access to employment – which is central to the hopelessness and purposelessness that 'disadvantaged' students in such communities feel towards their schooling. For many of these students, it is blatantly obvious that schooling does not and cannot deliver on such promises. Schools and their teachers are not able to control or even significantly influence broader social and economic conditions let alone employment conditions within their local communities. They cannot manufacture employment for their graduating students, certainly not on any large scale. Nor can they guarantee the longevity of or access to particular employment now subject to the vagaries of a global economy and a global workforce.

Taking a stance

While these broader social and economic influences can adversely position some students from low SES backgrounds, they also work to inform the stances that schools take in relation to their students.

Students aren't likely to do well and parents aren't interested anyway

In schools servicing disadvantaged communities, 'low expectations and aspirations for student achievements are often endemic features of school cultures' (Lingard et al. 2003, 131). There was similar evidence of the adoption of such stances in our case study. As one teacher explained to us:

> within our school … we've got to watch that we don't water down the curriculum just because of the fact that … [it] is in a low socio-economic town and … there is a high percentage of people who are on [unemployment benefits]; there is a high percentage of parents that probably wouldn't be able to read either. (Teacher # 16)

Indeed, a number of teachers expressed their concern that 'the junior curriculum has been dumbed down' (Teacher # 17). One teacher recalled that:

> When I [first] came here I felt that [lack of] intellectual rigour compared to my last school… That was a really big focus [last year], trying to raise intellectual quality while still catering for everybody … It was really hard … So that's what we're trying to improve. (Teacher # 17)

Schools also adopt stances in relation to disadvantaged parents, often (incorrectly) that they are not interested in the education (and under-achievement) of their children (Mills & Gale, 2004). This can reinforce, even contribute to, student outcomes anticipated by schools and teachers. As one parent told us:

> Last year [my friend's son] failed English … It was an extreme shock. All through that year the boy thought he was doing okay … [and the parents] had no contact with the teacher ... he never let them know in any way whatsoever that [their son] was struggling. (Parent # 19)

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Such parents were of the view that the school operated in the interests of 'good families' and that it was less concerned about the education of their 'bad' or 'deficient' children. These parents believed that teachers had very low expectations of their children and barely noticed when they were underachieving. In short, by explaining student under-achievement in terms of their lack of ability or aspiration, and accepting poor academic results as natural or inevitable, the stances that teachers and schools take do not serve students' best interests. Rather, they tend to reinforce the perception that students in these schools are not 'cut out' for the academic demands of schooling.

An academic curriculum is not everything – they need hands-on alternatives
While teachers in the school believed in the importance of catering for students with different futures, for one teacher, this meant that: 'Not all kids are meant … to be spending four years of their life in uni[versity] because they'd be wasting their time … They can get apprenticeships and try different avenues where their abilities are' (Teacher # 16).

Similarly, it was the Principal's dream to build on the knowledges and skills of the marginalised in the community, and turn the school into a community education centre where the school might develop a:

> shop front where [students] get training and if it's a tourism venture, [learn about] interaction with people; how to deal with customers. If it's selling coffee, [learn about] how to bake cakes and how to work in that element … [S]howcasing the tables that my manual arts department produces. The stuff that they produce could be sold by the students … And I believe that by giving them that training in a sustainable business ... they can then go out into the community and using the skills that they've got, such as gardening or making garden seats or baking cheesecakes, they can ... set up little businesses that will give them an income. (Principal)

Consider the similarities between the Principal's 'dream' and the 'alternative program' on offer within the school. Some of these students:

> can't cope with … having to sit down and read a book in class … [So] we take those kids out and give them to the alternative program teacher who … at the moment is planting [shrubs,

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flowers, trees, etc] and he tells them about chlorophyll and sunlight and things like that … [The alternative program teacher] refuses to do anything but hands-on stuff … so they basically work with him doing something around the school. (Teacher # 15)

While such programs and their facilitators may well have the best of intentions, the message communicated to these students – who could see themselves as not capable of doing the same work as their peers – is of low expectation. This reading of the futures that fit these students – that they *require* 'hands-on' alternatives to the academic curriculum – is illustrative of the deficit stance taken by some in the school. Many would agree that 'a school experience where any given child does not have equitable access to positive learning experiences and potential academic success' (Chubbuck 2010, 198) is unjust. As Kalantzis et al. (1990, 221) argue, 'alternative' courses for the 'less academically inclined', underpinned by the 'rhetoric of choice, individual and community relevance, and democratically diversified curriculum … [have] an underside which in some other senses [is] not so democratic. In effect, it often [amounts] to a new form of streaming, dressed up in democratic garb'. Indeed, 'providing special programmes and personnel in behaviour units to maintain these young people in the margins of school life devoid of credentials which they can trade upon leaving school is an impoverished reading of the nature of educational dysfunction' (Slee 1995, 10).

As valuable as general and vocational studies are, then, Teese (2006) suggests that they should be accompanied by opportunities for students to also access areas of the curriculum of high cognitive demand (including within vocational programs) – and, in turn, the careers that depend on them. While we acknowledge that the issues at stake here – such as how vocational education can be offered (i) as a genuine alternative to academic education, (ii) in ways that do not entrap low SES students in low SES destinations, and (iii) in ways that are likely to maintain the engagement of students and equip them for skilled work and financial independence – are incredibly complex, their full exploration is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

While improving the quality of teaching is central to 'fixing' student under-achievement, this article's major contribution is in its insistence that we rethink the influence of broader constraints on student

achievement in terms of positions and stances. As Bourdieu explains, 'fields', or the social contexts in which individuals act, are structured spaces of positions. It is the distribution of different kinds of resources or 'capital' – both their volume and structure – that determines one's position in a field. When these positions interact with habitus, different *postures* (*prises de position*) or stances are produced.

As action is constituted through a dialectical relationship between an individual's thought and activity and the objective world, individuals endowed with an equivalent overall capital can differ in their stances. Concomitantly, similar dispositions can generate very different, sometimes opposing, stances depending on the structure of the field (Bourdieu 1991). It is the inseparability of positions and stances that warrants their simultaneous analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

In this article, then, our focus has been deliberately two-fold: drawing attention to (i) external constraints that can adversely position students and schools from low SES backgrounds, and (ii) the way that this positioning informs the stances that teachers and schools sometimes take in relation to their students. As has been illustrated here, broader social and economic influences comprise one factor which can position students from low SES backgrounds without resources, without hope or purpose and without a working future; all of which help to explain student disengagement and under-achievement. In such contexts, institutional stances of low expectation for both student achievement and parent interest and involvement adopted by the school and its teachers do not serve students' best interests or work towards improving their academic outcomes.

We do not wish to suggest, however, that schools and teachers are solely to blame for such arrangements. While teachers might be encouraged to have higher expectations of their students and their communities, these cannot be divorced from the very real contextual constraints and realities faced by the students they teach. As we note above, the field of positions is methodologically inseparable from the field of stances. This is precisely why both spaces, that of objective positions and that of stances, must be analysed together, 'treated as "two translations of the same sentence" as Spinoza put it' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 105). Nevertheless, it remains that, 'in a situation of equilibrium, *the space of positions tends to command the space of position-takings*' (Bourdieu and

Wacquant 1992, 105, emphasis original). While 'the space of position-takings', what teachers (can) do in their specific contexts, needs to be understood as influenced by this broader context, it is this 'space of positions', the broader 'context' in which schools are positioned, that requires our attention if the academic outcomes of disadvantaged students are to be improved.

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[i]   This is a gap reminiscent of the one emerging in labour market remunerations (Gale, 2005).