***Complexities of Researching with Young People***

**The undue burden of methodological warrant on the voice of disengaged young people**

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**Abstract**

This chapter explores the collective voice of young people within calls for school reform and broader concerns around the level of disengagement in Australian schools. The chapter draws on the collective voice concept from human resources and business management to consider the argument that the collective voice of some young people has been given undue methodological warrant in these debates. The chapter presents the argument that the collective voice of young people who have reengaged with education in alternative learning environments is being overread in these debates. While their voices are relevant here, the chapter challenges the capacity of their collective voice to represent the experience of all young people disengaged in Australian schools. The chapter highlights the absence of the voices of young people who are disengaged with learning but remain, for often complex reasons, in mainstream education. Representing the collective voice of these young people presents a unique challenge though as they are less accessible, and many have not yet demonstrated the indicators that would flag their experience as relevant in these debates. Their collective voice is relevant though and this chapter calls for ways to better understand the complex factors that lead to disengagement in Australian schools.

**Introduction**

The use of voice in contemporary research presents a number of challenges and the purpose of this chapter is to explore the methodological warrant that has been attributed to the collective voices of young people in alternative learning environments in calls for school reform. The discussion explores the critique of voice as a research methodology to investigate how the stories of these young people have been overburdened with methodological warrant (Yates 2003) in calls to understand the levels of disengagement in Australian schools. Despite contemporary critique, the study of voice continues to be acknowledged as an authentic and youth-friendly method to engage young people in research (Bourke and MacDonald 2018; Furlong 2015; Tarabini, Jacovkis and Montes 2018). The question of how much weight the individual stories of participants in small-number qualitative studies carry (Yates 2003) is explored in this chapter alongside critique of voice as the most authentic truth in research (Mazzei and Jackson 2009; St Pierre 2009). The investigation of the overreading of the collective voice of these young people explored here is situated within the broader concerns around the level of disengagement in Australian schools and to re-imagine what schooling might look like for young Australians (Lewthwaite et al. 2017; McGregor et al. 2017; Mills and McGregor 2014; te Riele 2009).

**Levels of disengagement in Australian schools**

In recent years it has been argued that children and young people are disengaging from Australia’s learning environments with as many as 40% of children and young people unproductive in any year and over half of these were showing signs of disengagement (Angus et al. 2010; Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017; Quinn and Owen 2016; Welters et al. 2018). The most recent international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results shows ‘below-average levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement’ amongst Australian students and ‘over a quarter of young people – at least 80,000 students who are not completing Year 12 or equivalent each year (Lamb et al., 2017). An increasing number of young people are being excluded, or pushed out, from school because they are being framed as failures or un-motivated to learn (Best 2015; McGregor et al. 2015; Smyth 2006; Robinson and Smyth 2016).

A Western Australian study, *The Pipeline Project* (Angus et al. 2010), tracked 1300 students from Year 2 – 8, and found that up to 40% of the students were unproductive at any given time. Their study found that over half of those were disengaged, displaying behaviours from being inattentive and lacking motivation through to disruptive, aggressive behaviour (Angus et al. 2010). In 2013 a New South Wales student feedback survey with 78,600 secondary school students, *Student Engagement and Wellbeing in NSW* (NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2015), identified a range of complex factors that contribute to disengagement. The study identified socio-economic status, living in non-metropolitan areas and gender as factors that impact on an individual students’ disengagement from school. Research reveals that disengagement from school may be evident in the primary school years or even earlier (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004) and is the cumulative result of many factors. The gap between high-performing and low-performing students is growing and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be disengaged from school (Sullivan et al. 2014). The links between disengagement and disadvantage are clearly evident but are not contributing factors for all children and young people. The early stages of disengagement or passive disengagement are difficult to identify as children and young people may continue to complete their work but gradually lose interest, others may find the work too difficult and others find it too easy (Angus et al. 2010). While measuring some elements of engagement is possible it is difficult to quantify students social, emotional and cognitive engagement (AITSL 2016; Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). Even high performing students can be disengaged if they are not motivated to extend themselves. The path to disengagement is complex but keeping children and young people connected to education is recognised as a critical factor for future financial independence, work opportunities, health and wellbeing as well as social engagement with families and community (Lamb and Huo 2017).

Smyth (2006, p. 288) acknowledges that the reasons children and young people disengage from school and education are multi-faceted and complex, but ultimately, he argues, they ‘boil down to “political” reasons’ when students begin to ‘refuse to make the emotional and relational investment necessary’ to engage with schools and learning. He argues that there is a ‘clash of reference’ between the schools ‘frame of reference’ and the young person’s ‘frames of reference’ (Smyth 2006, p. 290). To overcome this, it is vital to move beyond blaming the individual or the social structures of school and to begin to understand the relationships and processes that play out between the school and young people (Smyth 2006, p. 290).

**Disengaged from school: the perception of young people**

Welters and colleagues (2018) suggest an interdisciplinary approach is required to understand students’ perceptions of the learning environments in both mainstream schools and alternative learning environments. They have used a quantitative instrument with Australian students who have reengaged in learning in alternative learning environments to improve knowledge and understanding of disengagement. Their findings indicate that there is no homogenous attitude to the student’s experience, particularly in mainstream schools. Even learning environments that young people perceived to be more favourable or effective do not automatically prevent student disengagement and are not always a ‘precondition of educational disengagement’ (Welters et al. 2018, p. 13).

Many of their participants reflected favourably on their previous educational experience but had ‘nonetheless disengaged from mainstream schooling’ (Welters et al. 2018, p. 8). A key finding from their work with young people in alternative learning environments was the significance of feeling valued and being able to ‘re-evaluate and reform their sense of value’ (Welters et al. 2018, p. 13, see also Lewthwaite et al. 2017) in alternative learning environments. This contrasted with their mainstream experience where many young people felt devalued. The study is, of course, retrospective and young people were reflecting back to a trajectory that ultimately saw them disengage from mainstream schooling. It is difficult to track this process in real time as the pathway to disengagement is unique for each student and does not follow a linear pathway. There are obviously a number of risk factors and school attendance is a key indicator but disengagement is a gradual process (Welters et al. 2018). Understanding students emotional and cognitive disengagement is more difficult (ATISL 2014).

The Grattan Institute (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017) investigated the level of disengagement in Australian schools and acknowledged the difficulties in identifying students who had disengaged or were in the process of disengaging. Their observations revisited the findings of Galton and colleagues (1999) identifying groups of students who they described as passively disengaged, some heading towards a complete disengagement from school. Some were identified as the ‘intermittent workers’, identified in the earlier research, who worked when they were being watched but moved off task whenever an opportunity arose, others were considered to be ‘easy riders’, who worked slowly, dragging out tasks for as long as they could, others were described as ‘ghosts’ who did not attract the teacher’s attention and slipped under the radar (Galton et al., 1999; Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017)*.* In both instances, the understanding of disengagement was gleaned from the researchers’ voice (Galton et al. 1999) and larger scale, quantitative reports (Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2017). The accounts of young people’s experience of working only when they were being watched, of dragging out tasks or avoiding the teachers’ attention are absent. The twenty years between the two pieces of research demonstrates the challenges of accessing the less readily available, or the difficult to identify, groups of young people who remain in mainstream education but are in the process of disengaging with education. The need for greater insight and to identify more nuanced indicators of student disengagement is as important today as it was at the end of the 20th century.

**Student voice**

The study of student voice incorporates a long history of practices ‘which include student consultation, participation, collaboration, leadership and intergenerational learning’ (Quinn and Owen 2016, p. 70). One field of student voice relates to young people’s participation in decision making at the school level (Mayes and Groundwater-Smith 2013; Mitra 2018). In this instance, the collective student voice’s speaks to concepts of power between ‘young people and adults’ in the school space (Mitra 2018, p. 479). There is an acknowledgement in this scholarship that the young people’s collective voice comes with an agenda, with experience being framed by their own unique circumstances. The task for the researcher in this field is to ‘elicit and demonstrate some patterns of broader significance’ from the individual experiences (Yates 2003 p. 229). Recent studies use student voice as a representation of students’ experience of [dis]engagement, connectedness, wellbeing, social exclusion, bullying and school reform (Aldridge et al. 2016; Bourke and MacDonald 2018; Quinn and Owen 2016; Robinson and Smyth 2016; Tarabini, Jacovkis and Montes 2018). Much of this research is qualitative, focussed on individual schools or communities, and the evidence shows that even primary school students can convey their experiences (Quinn and Owen 2016). Interviews and focus groups are combined with larger scale survey findings to enable researchers to investigate key aspects of student experience. In this scholarship, researchers recognise that each individuals’ educational experience is unique and ‘shaped by the quality of the relationships between individuals at the school, the quality of the teaching and learning that takes place and the physical, social and emotional safety of the students’ (Aldridge et al. 2016, p. 6). It has been argued that student voice cannot be separated from the ‘role of state regulation and governance’ in calls to reimagine education (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 311).

Student voice from mainstream schools in calls for school reform has tended to be drawn from large scale, quantitative research that conducts surveys around student engagement, wellbeing and belonging. These are often conducted by independent youth organisations such as The Foundation for Young Australians, *Unlimited Potential: A data and information resource on young Australians,* Mission Australia, *Youth Survey Report,* the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing reports,* Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), *Report card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians,* to name a few of the larger, annual studies. State education departments also conduct large scale quantitative research with children and young people. The Department of Education and Training Victoria conducts an annual Attitude to School Survey will all children from Year 4 – 12 in government schools which measures levels of student satisfaction including their connectedness to school. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training conducts the *Tell Them From Me* suite of surveys with students, parents and teachers and other states’ Education Departments have their own measurement tools. These larger scale reports provide valuable quantitative data on the experiences of Australian children and young people. They fall short however, of providing the valuable insights of educational experience that are captured through the voices of young people.

**Collective Voice**

The concept of collective voice has been used extensively in human resource and business management disciplines as a means of communicating with management and to have meaningful input into decisions and suggestions for innovation and change (Hennala and Melkas 2016; Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse 2015). The concept of collective voice is to present a multi-voiced approach that represents an ‘interpretation of views’ from the voices of many, rather than the individual’s perspective (Hennala and Melkas 2016, p. 63). Collective voice has been interpreted in a variety of ways across these disciplines but there are two consistent motives: to eliminate employee dissatisfaction and to capture suggestions to improve business performance and introduce innovative practices (Mowbray, Wilkinson and Tse 2015). Collective voice in the human resource disciplines enables employees to represent conflicting views to management. The approach requires a deeper analysis of the participants’ views but is designed to avoid the large-scale surveys that have become popular in contemporary society (Hennala and Melkas 2016). Collective voice also enables the voice of the user who benefits from the change or innovation to contribute to the discussions and proposal for change rather than those who benefit from the end product or service (Hennala and Melkas 2016).

There are benefits of learning from the practices of other disciplines and industries and I argue that collective voice provides a new way to consider the representation of young people’s voices in education debates. The young people are the users who benefit from the change or innovation in education while the employers, policy makers and economists are the beneficiaries of the end product or service. In the school reform agenda, the beneficiaries of the end product or service are making the strongest contribution to these debates while the collective voice of the users, children and young people, is being represented by the larger scale surveys and quantitative research with young people and those who have re-engaged in alternative learning environments. Neither, I argue, truly represent the collective voices of the young people who remain passively disengaged in mainstream education.

**Methodological warrant**

The concept of methodological warrant draws on the work of Yates (2003), who reflected on the weight that the evidence from small-number qualitative research subjects may carry. McLeod and Yates (Yates 2003) focussed on their 12 to 18 Project longitudinal study, and their own potential over-reading of a research design that highlighted links between their study and broader educational issues. The focus of this chapter is to consider the potential over-reading or undue burden of the body of research investigating the experiences of young people in alternative learning environments in the call for education reform in Australia. The aim here is not to dismiss the valuable scholarship of alternative education scholars but rather to consider the undue burden of young people’s voices that others have ascribed in the call for educational reform around Australia. While it may appear dismissive to consider 70,000 voices (te Riele 2014) a small sample, the scale is relative when you consider that this represents less than 2% of the 3,849,225 students enrolled in Australian schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017).

**Alternative Education**

Alternative education is a broad term covering a range of educational programs and organisations. For the purposes of this discussion, alternative education is described as ‘the flexi, second-chance or last-chance schools’ (McGregor et al. 2017, p. 4) that offer young people who are disenfranchised or disengaged from education a chance to re-engage in learning environments. Many of these young people have had negative experiences in mainstream education or live with significant social and/or developmental challenges. Many live with challenging life circumstances, including complex family situations, psychological and health issues. A number have been bullied or experienced social exclusion for their perceived difference and inability to fit into mainstream schooling (Tarabini, Jacovkis and Montes 2018). Others have been excluded or suspended from school and feel that they have been forced out (Robinson and Smyth 2016).

Many young people enrol in alternative learning environments because they were unable to conform to the policies and expectations of mainstream schooling and the over-emphasis on measurement and university entrance scores (MacDonald, Bottrell and Johnson 2018). The ‘neoliberal focus on individual accountability’ emphasises the deficit of the individual, blaming them rather than the system for their disenfranchisement (McGregor et al. 2015; Mills and McGregor 2014). Scholars in the alternative education field work hard to ensure the voices and stories of marginalised or disenfranchised young people are heard (MacDonald, Bottrell and Johnson 2018; McGregor et al. 2017; Mills and McGregor 2014; Robinson and Smyth 2016; te Riele 2009). This scholarship builds on a body of knowledge that recognises that members of marginalised groups can speak for their own standpoint and ‘articulate their own ways of knowing and their own knowledges’ (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 313). Sharing their own educational experiences provides valuable insights into the shortcomings of Australia’s mainstream education system and the accumulation of ‘years of educational “failure” and lack of belonging’ (McGregor et al. 2015, p. 611). Research shows that the majority of young people who have re-engaged in alternative learning environments view their new learning environment more favourably than that of their previous schools (Hayes 2012; McGregor et al. 2015; Mills and McGregor 2014; te Riele 2009; Welters et al. 2018)

In this scholarship, voice has been privileged as a means of assisting marginalised young people to speak about their own educational journey and to share the experiences that resulted in their disenfranchisement and disengagement with education (McGregor et al. 2017). Their stories demonstrate the value of policies and practices in alternative learning environments. They perceive these as a more holistic approach to education as it recognises that:

Education and learning cannot be divorced from a young person’s life. This approach to education is holistic, in the sense that it recognises that learning happens in real-life situations (in and outside of school) and also that schooling is part of life. As Dave (staff, St Luke’s ESU) put it: “we don’t deal with them in isolation as a school student. We deal with them as a person” (te Riele 2014, 63).

While alternative education environments may not ‘deliver the educational capital necessary to subvert dominant relations of privilege and oppression, they do provide some indicators of the ways in which socially just schooling might be achieved’ (McGregor et al. 2017, p. 92). Scholars in this discipline argue that there are important lessons to be learnt from their approach, lessons that would ‘ensure that all young people can be “educated” rather than “schooled”’ providing “individual agency” for all students rather than “conformity”’ (McGregor et al. 2017, p 92). The collective voice of these young people when they ‘speak (*their)* truth/s to power’ (Said, cited in McGregor et al. 2017, p. 9) is, not surprisingly, compelling. Yet it should be remembered that their voices are not ‘independently constructed’ but rather they are ‘the messages’ created by *particular pedagogic contexts’* (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 317) that engage with the power relations in schools and the broader call for school reform. These are subjective voices that cannot be used as the only argument for school reform but should be recognised for the valuable insights they provide into the ‘inequalities associated with learning’ (Arnot and Reay 2007, p. 318).

My argument here is not to discount the voices of young people in alternative educational environments but to recognise that, as a collective, their voice may be carrying an undue burden. While they may themselves be advocates for change, the methodological warrant (Yates 2003) attributed to their collective voice falls short of representing the experiences of students who are passively disengaged in mainstream education but choose to remain.

**Expanding the collective voice**

The concept of collective voice provides a lens to consider the reading of the collective voices of young people in Australia’s school reform agenda. The collective voice of young people who have reengaged with education in alternative education environments is making a valuable contribution to the call to reimagine schooling in Australia. Offered up as their own knowledge, the experiences of these young people are shared as evidence of the shortcomings of Australia’s mainstream education system and they make a valuable contribution to these debates. Largely absent from these debates though is the collective voice of young people who have disengaged from their education but choose, or are compelled, to remain in mainstream education. Their contribution to debates is largely through large scale survey findings and investigations, research which limits the opportunity for their voices to speak their own knowledge to power. The different contributions of the two groups of young people demonstrates two key complexities of incorporating young people’s voice in research, 1) the genuine representation of experience without presenting an authentic truth for all and 2) the challenges of engaging vulnerable young people or the difficult to access.

The experiences of young people in alternative educational environments represents the extreme end of educational disenfranchisement and disengagement. The educational experiences of these young people share a narrative of difference, inability to conform, social exclusion, of not fitting in, of disadvantage, blame and the weight of failure. Their collective subjectivity has been described as one of educational rejection from the normative expectations of Australia’s education systems (Best 2015). Collectively, they present a very compelling story to those in power of an education system that is failing many young people. These are different stories to the grander narrative of economists and policy makers who call for a new education system that will develop young people’s capabilities and skills for future employment (Australian Government, Department of Education and Training 2019). Young people’s experiences are valuable and they have much to offer in the debate for school reform. How authentic are they though, in representing the voices of the many young people who are passively disengaged with mainstream education but choose to stay or not to take action.

The collective voices of young people in student voice scholarship are often speaking directly to power and calls to change the dynamic between teachers and students and engage in new adult-youth partnerships (Mitra 2018). By invoking the concept of collective voice from the human resources and business management disciplines, the argument here is to highlight that the collective voices of young people who are disengaged but remain in mainstream education, or are in the process of disengaging, are underrepresented in calls for school reform. There is a place for survey findings in debates for school reform but missing from research is the capacity for these young people to speak their own knowledge and share their experiences. These young people are difficult to access as the path to disengagement can be the result of multiple cumulative factors over many years. The challenge is knowing which students are in the stage of passive disengagement and at what stage of their educational journey this begins. These may not be the most vulnerable young people in debates for school reform but their experience is valuable although largely absent in school reform debates. Without their voices, the collective voice of young people contributing to calls for school reform are not genuinely representative of the full range of disengaged users.

The multi-voiced approach of collective voice is designed to provide an opportunity for all users to contribute to discussions and suggestions for change and innovation. In making these contributions the aim is that users will be more engaged in improved business performance and avoid the dissatisfaction of being asked to undertake change they have not been a party to. The complexities of interpreting the views of all users in the school reform debates omits the collective experiences of a large group of young people. This is not an intentional omission, but rather one that reflects the complexities of researching with children and young people. There is also a space here to argue that young people are both the users and the beneficiaries of school reform. While the beneficiaries of school reform in the present are employers, policy makers and the economy, young people are the ultimate beneficiaries as they will become the employers, policy makers and economy in the future. This challenges the concept of collective voice as it stands but could be explored in future research.

The challenge for researchers at this stage is how to access young people who are in the process of disengagement, and to know at what stage they might be able to tell their story and contribute to the school reform debates. Ensuring their voices are heard is vital though if we consider that 40% of the 3.8 million Australian students enrolled in our schools may be unproductive at any time and over 50% of these, 760,000 students, at risk of being disengaged.

**Conclusion: Sharing the load**

The reasons that young people disengage with education in mainstream schools are complex and the pathway to disengagement is often gradual and influenced by multiple factors. Understanding the reasons young people disengage with their education is significant though as staying engaged with education is considered to be a critical factor in successful work opportunities, financial independence, health and wellbeing, relationships and social engagement with families and communities. The need to develop better understandings of why, and how, young people disengage with education is evident.

In this chapter I have highlighted the undue burden of methodological warrant on the collective voice of some young people in the call for school reform and to re-imagine what schooling might look like for young Australians. The article demonstrates how the collective voice of young people who have reengaged with education in alternative early learning environments has been used to convey the experience of disengagement in Australian schools. While the collective experience of these young people is valuable in the school reform debates, their collective voices speaks to the extreme ends of educational disenfranchisement and disengagement, where young people have left the mainstream system and, for some, believe that education is not for, or about, them (MacDonald, Bottrell and Johnson 2018). This is not to suggest that alternative learning environments are not valuable learning spaces, but most young people do not consider alternative learning environments until they are forced to do so (MacDonald, Johnson and Bottrell forthcoming). The collective voice of these young people is valuable and relevant in these debates but the purpose of this article is to question their capacity to truly represent the collective voices of young people who are part of the 40% of unproductive or passively disengaged who remain in mainstream schools or the 760,000 who have disengaged but, for often complex reasons, remain in the system (Angus et al. 2010; Goss, Sonnemann and Griffiths 2018). Ensuring their collective voice is heard in the call for education reform highlights one of the greatest challenges of researching with young people, accessing the voices of groups who are less accessible because they haven’t yet demonstrated the indicators that would flag them as research participants.

While statistical data from large scale surveys provides some evidence of the numbers of young people who are unproductive, passively disengaged or disengaged and still within mainstream education they lack the poignancy and rich narrative of personal experience that has so successfully been adopted by alternative learning scholarship. Without their voices the collective voice of young people in calls for school reform cannot genuinely represent the full range of users.

The challenge is, of course, how to access these students who may not even recognise their lack of interest in school as being a form of disengagement or have not yet been identified by schools as being unproductive or in the process of disengagement. Overcoming the complexities of accessing these young people, and ensuring their collective voices are heard in school reform debates is essential though if we are to truly understand the intricate, multiple and complex reasons for student disengagement.

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