Negotiating Second Chance Schooling in Neoliberal Times: Teacher Work for Schooling Justice

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to reflect upon our work as two insider teacher researchers using action research methodology with teacher colleagues, marginalised young people and community stakeholders to develop a sustainable and socially just senior secondary 'second chance' school for young people who had left schooling without credentials. Twelve years after our beginning developmental work, the Second Chance Community College (SCCC) continues with over 100 students enrolled in 2015. It has catered for over 1000 students since its development. Through pursuing critical forms of action research, enriched through active participation within a university led professional learning community, we became 'radical pragmatic' educators. This called us into collaborative, tactical and critical teacher work to navigate through constraining neoliberal logic with students and colleagues, reassembling our professional selves and radically changing the SCCC design from the design logics of conventional secondary schools. The research demonstrated that teachers can build a socially just school for marginalised young people and as a consequence make a significant difference to the lives of young people no longer involved in schooling. Through pursuing the research within community, engendering partnerships with young people and youth stakeholders, engaging in teacher activism and seeking methodological and tactical support from a university-led professional learning community, we made a small contribution to the lives of young people who without our work, would have continued to be disconnected from the educational project.

THE PHENOMENA OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

It is well known that children from low SES backgrounds are more prone to leave school early (Rumberger, 1987; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Hattam &, Smyth, 2004) and less likely to enter the labour market or pursue post-

secondary training. According to Teese and Polesel (2003), one in four young people in Australia leave school without completing their senior secondary certificate. They argue the two major motives for quitting school early were demand for work or an income, and lack of interest in schoolwork. Other researchers have argued that 'dropping out' of schooling is identity based. They describe students as feeling powerless to stop schooling's assault on their identity and consequently choose to leave (Hattam & Smyth, 2004).

An extensive repository of research into early school leaving exists in Australia and identifies relational identity-based and economic reasons (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, 2015; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004; Smyth, 2003) as the predominant motives behind young people's decision to leave school. Relational based reasons are explained as young people who find the cultural geography of schooling to be alienating (Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003; Smyth & Hattam, 2002) and the economic reasons are described as an income pull factor that is immediately attractive to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teese & Polesel (2003) argue many disadvantaged young people are seduced by the benefits of immediate monetary gain but unfortunately often find themselves in tenuous part-time employment arrangements that are invariably terminated when the young person reaches the adult pay rate age.

Consequently, our beginning hypothesis was that in order for young people to be convinced about giving secondary education a second chance, considerable school renovation work had to be undertaken. We believed this renovation must address the economic and relational dimensions behind young people's decisions to leave in the first place. Beyond this highly complex schooling renovation work, there was also a clear social justice imperative that new educational options are appropriately resourced and made sustainable. If they fall over in the beginning weeks or months, then many young people, previously made vulnerable by their negative experiences of schooling, lose their preferred and in many instances only opportunity to attain schooling completion. Consequently, their right to a secondary education is forfeited. This can render young people societally marginalised through the constricted life opportunities propounded by school non-completion, rendering significant economic and social costs to society (King, 1999).

OUR BEGINNING CONTEXT

Historically, many teachers have entered the foray of alternative schooling development driven by a moral obligation to offer (something to) young people who view the attainment of a senior secondary credential as unfinished business. We were two public secondary school teachers who with Principal support, moved our work into the community. We met regularly with youth stakeholders (health professionals, employment services staff, youth workers, council development officers and TAFE[1] personnel) nurturing professional partnerships and inviting them, according to their levels of

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[1] TAFE is a Technical and Further Education institution located on various government funded campuses throughout Australia for students wishing to pursue post-compulsory accredited trades training.

expertise and available professional time, to offer individualised student and community support for our second chance schooling endeavour. We also interviewed young people who were unemployed in the community. To guide and inform the progress of our endeavour, we participated in action research methodology.

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Action research methodology is internationally recognised as a well-developed philosophical and epistemological approach. It has been described as a collaborative and systemic process where practitioners voluntarily engage in a spiral of reflection, documentation, and action in order to understand more fully the nature and consequences of aspects of their practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) with a view to shaping further action or changing their situation. It follows the cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that can lead to community and organisational change (McNiff, 2013).

Action research therefore offered us insightful ways to develop a second chance, socially just, schooling initiative designed for the marginalised young people we worked with.

> Practitioner research and action research have the capacity to open communicative spaces in which the 'way things are' is open to question and exploration. (Kemmis, 2006, p.474)

In practice, undertaking action research meant we were committed to maintaining a critical and reflective research disposition in all of our teacher, student and community interactions. In order to do this, we attempted to sustain throughout the research:

- Extended and intensive reflective observation of our work and our thinking;
- Respect for teachers' and students' standpoints and perspectives;
- Consciousness of the need to understand the institutional locations in which we worked; and
- Consideration of the local in the context of the national and the global.

As a consequence, we systematically gathered and evaluated ethnographic evidence (Giles, 2008, Denzin, 1991) of our work with young people, within our immediate community and our interactions with the state political apparatus, identifying and highlighting key themes. We reflected upon our work with three Principals, two politicians, five bureaucrats and 35 students recording observations and interviews in field-notes and journals, accompanied by our own explicit reflections and self-revelations (Hannabuss, 2000) that naturally featured as rigorous daily conversations amongst ourselves and within monthly meetings with university colleagues facilitating a university-led professional learning community (ULPLC). We immersed ourselves in action research built upon a premise for much needed educational reform, marshalling a particular form of action research called critical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) which seeks to offer researchers through their

involvement in the collaborative research process insights into unjust social conditions that need to be addressed through action.

> Critical action research expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analyses: the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, the way language is used, organisation and power in a local situation, and action to improve things. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p.274)

For us, undertaking critical action research meant recognising the impact of the socially unjust arrangements of schooling (Smyth, 1987; Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008; Smyth et al., 2000) as experienced by the disillusioned young people we worked with and then addressing these unjust arrangements through socially just schooling reform.

DATA ANALYSIS

We coded the gathered data into 'chunks' that emerged from our on-going research endeavours. Documents, written ethnographic observations and reflections upon our work, the changes we instituted and interview data were initially recorded separately, crosschecked for consistency and included for further analysis. These "chunks" formed the basis of the coding frame. Next, the codes were used to develop sub-themes and then progressively a smaller number of overall themes. This coding practice and identification of key themes was informed by the critical university-led conversations we undertook within the ULPLC. Here we struggled with fellow teacher practitioners for socially just insights into doing schooling differently from the data we presented. The ethnographic field-notes and accompanying student interviews were thematically coded using a hermeneutic process which was replicated from similar research methodologies (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Giles, 2008). Ethical approval for this research inquiry was gained from the Faculty of Education, Adelaide University, South Australia and the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (DECD).

SCHOOLING AND MARGINALISATION

At the commencement of the research from the interviews we conducted with young people no longer engaged in formalised learning, we recognised schooling as something we (adult educators and educational systems) did to young people, which failed to generate robust teacher-student relationships and sufficient interest in formalised learning to keep them at school. Life in our school, where we worked as a school counsellor and art teacher, Gallipoli High School (GHS), renamed for anonymity reasons, was a daily intensive interplay of relations experienced by students and teachers. For some students at GHS their experience of these schooling relations had a marginalising effect. During our first year at GHS, the Principal had a frank conversation about the numbers of students exiting school.

You know…we are losing ten students a term from years 9 to 12. They're just walking out the gate. Last year there were 50 students who just up and left. (Journal Notes, 7 September, 2002)

We were unaware of the extent of the student exodus. We should have been aware of it. After many subsequent school exit conversations we learnt that for some leaving school was a walk to freedom, while for others, it was the walk of the emotionally beaten.

So what are you going to do Anthony? Have you got any plans? Yeah, I'll get a job or something – you know earn some money and get cashed up. *Have you got anything lined up?* Na, not yet but I will. I'm not comin back to this place. (Journal Notes, 2 April, 2002)

We subsequently recognised the need to offer marginalised young people outside of schooling a new schooling experience that offered connectedness through valuing who they were as young people and empowering them to be successful learners. Our research question was: *How can we work to re-engage young people disillusioned with conventional secondary schooling back into formalised learning?* In this research many of the marginalised young people we worked with endured challenging life world experiences. Most were from poor backgrounds and all of them were disillusioned with their previous schooling experiences. They told us again and again that going back to GHS or other conventional secondary schools was not an option.

We therefore viewed conventional schools as problematic social learning environments for these students. In our conversations with young people outside of schooling, we gained insights into what we called the 'action zones' of schooling; the zones of schooling that manifested in the culture, structures and privileged pedagogies of schooling. For us, these action zones in conventional secondary schools were characterised by historical and habitual schooling practices. Often these practices were not critiqued and changed because life in schools was too fast, too busy, too unrelenting to offer teachers' and leaders' time to collegially stand back, reflect, discuss and change (Zipin & White, 2003).

Pat Thomson (2002) described schools as having 'thisness;' a particular and unique schooling identity that presents in each school. We considered 'thisness' to be the DNA of the school. In our initial contemplations of the overarching research question we considered the 'thisness' of schooling to be derived from an amalgam of these action zones. We therefore constructed the 'School Design Conceptual' (figure 1 below) at the beginning of our research to recognise this and to acknowledge that our teacher (re) engagement work needed to occur within the school community (inside the school fence) and (outside of the school fence) within the surrounding community. By depicting four inside of schooling action zones namely; school structures, school culture, school pedagogy and school leadership and one out of school (beyond the school fence) action zone, namely community-based teacher work and student curricular work, we had an organised way of understanding the complexity of the before and after experiments of our action research, viewed through the changes rendered upon each zone. The 'School Design Conceptual' was

adapted from the National Schools Network reform work (Ladwig, Currie et al., 1994; Harradine 1996).
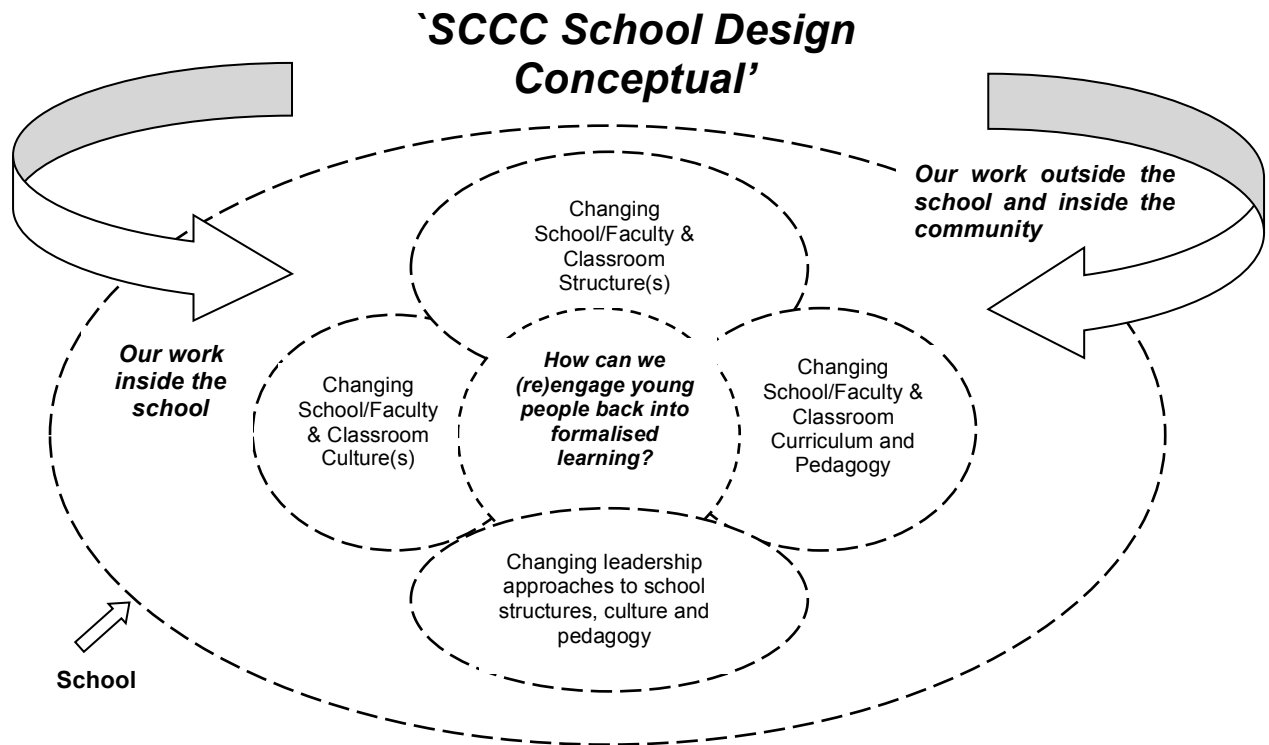
`SCCC School Design Conceptual'

Changing School/Faculty & Classroom Structure(s)

Our work inside the school

Our work outside the school and inside the community

Changing School/Faculty & Classroom Culture(s)

How can we (re)engage young people back into formalised learning?

Changing School/Faculty & Classroom Curriculum and Pedagogy

Changing leadership approaches to school structures, culture and pedagogy

School

Fig. 1 The `School Design Conceptual' illustrating the schooling action zones. The conceptual illustrates how we viewed the (re)engagement initiative within the Second Chance Community College (SCCC) at the beginning of the research.

THE ENGAGEMENT HOOK OF VOCATIONALISM

Having negotiated with the Manager of the TAFE to begin our second chance schooling endeavours on their campus, we began our school, called the Second Chance Community College (SCCC). It was renamed to preserve anonymity. For us, the journey of exploring the possibilities of second chance education led us through a number of theoretical and practical positions. We understood the importance of good relationships from our work as teachers and the theoretical opportunities offered by a vocational education from our reading.   We started with 35 young people, and privileged a vocational curriculum which we believed was the secondary schooling (re)engagement answer for our young people. In other words, we viewed vocational education and training (VET) as the panacea for the education of marginalised students. We were not alone in this view either. For example, in a recent Australian Government funded VET in schools research project, concerns were expressed that VET is still being viewed as an easy option and an engagement strategy for students under-achieving in the academic curriculum (Clarke, 2012).This view is also represented in the

research work of Polesel, Helme, Davies, Teese, Nicholas and Vickers (2004) and Rothman, Brown, Hillman, Marks, McKenzie and Underwood, (2011).

Historically, vocational education has been viewed as the lesser alternative to the hegemonic academic curriculum, targeting disadvantaged students (Blackmore, 1992). In more recent research, concerns about alternative courses including vocational education have arisen. They have been described as a form of bottom level streaming practice diminishing post-school opportunity.

> These 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. (Kalantzis et al., 1990, p.221 in Mills, 2008, p.104)

Our vocational curriculum approach promoted more equal power relations between students and teachers in the SCCC because of its adult learning orientation and because we were located on a TAFE campus, a technical and further education adult learning campus. For many of our beginning students the TAFE campus offered engaging educational experiences that were authentic, credentialed and immediately relevant, providing quick short course learning rewards e.g. senior first aid certificate, forklift licence training and tyre fitting. However, some of our students told us that the vocational curriculum was fundamentally lacking because it did not offer them access to the more intellectually rigorous areas of the senior schooling curriculum.

INSIGHTS FROM PARTICIPATION IN A UNIVERSITY LED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (ULPLC)

Prioritising vocational education was also problematic in relation to the notion of streaming. Through ULPLC participation we recognised that vocational education and training (VET) was in effect a version of streaming. Our vocational approach took all of the 'best' bottom streaming practices for 'at risk' students (narrow lock step vocational learning, light on theory, heavy on practical), and bundled them together into a caring adult learning environment. We were offering what Lingard (2007) described as 'pedagogies of indifference'.

> The lack of intellectual demandingness (particularly in schools serving disadvantaged communities and in secondary schools in such communities) has social justice implications. Indeed, this absence of intellectual demand works in the way in which Bourdieu suggests schools reproduce inequality, i.e. by demanding of all that which they do not give, those with the requisite cultural capital are advantaged in schooling. (Lingard, 2007, p. 259)

Although we saw ourselves as teachers in our beginning action research experiments acting with emancipatory intent, we were unaware that

our work was premised on deficit views of what the students could learn. Subsequent ULPLC discussions helped us to become more aware of the insidious influence of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 1991) upon our action research. Propounding a 'VETified' curriculum as the (re)engagement hook was code for 'schooling for work'. Unfortunately, this work, when it did eventuate for some of the SCCC students, was often low paid, infrequent, age dependent and tenuous.

The ULPLC foregrounded research-informed inquiry and discussion about more democratic forms of schooling. Essentially, schooling that promoted active citizenship in a curricular sense and life opportunity. In this community we met with academics and other educational professionals pursuing similar projects discussing, considering and critiquing the data that we were collecting and interpreting. Because we were leading the development of a new school for those students previously marginalised by schooling, we were morally obliged to offer the students enhanced educational opportunities rather than constrained vocational opportunities.
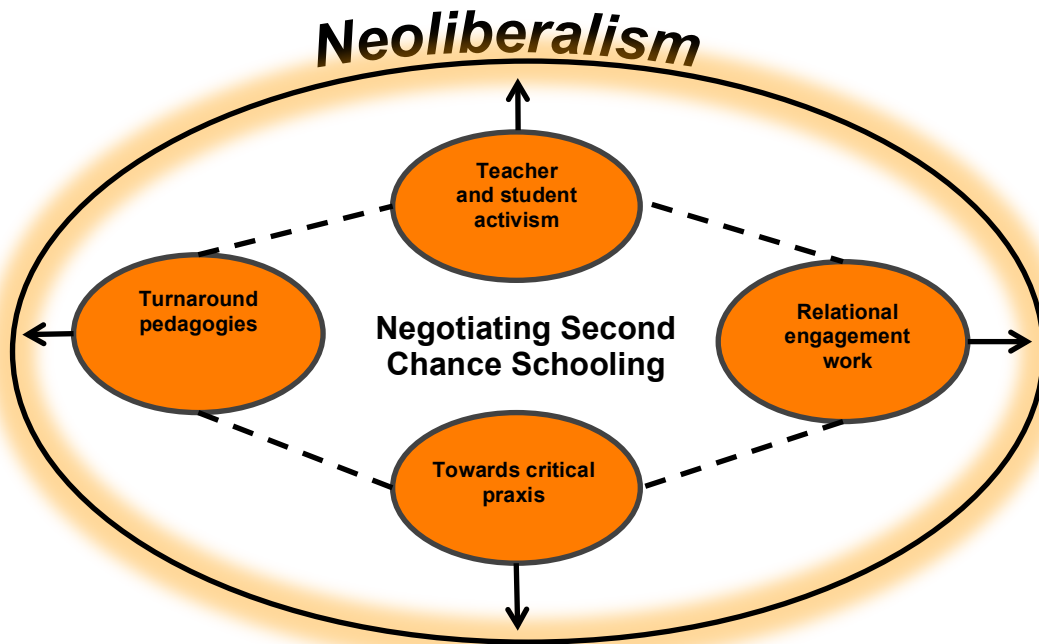

Fig. 2 Negotiating schooling: reconceptualising Boomer's `radical pragmatic' educator within socially just second chance schooling.

Within the ULPLC we participated in disciplined and rigorous conversations with teacher and university colleagues wrestling with how to offer more socially just schooling. We read and discussed critical educational research literature, theorised the social justice school experiments of teachers from other schools and listened to their experiences. Through these enabling professional conversations we became more attuned to critical action research methodology (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). Our SCCC developmental work subsequently moved into a negotiating socially just schooling project that involved new thinking with regards to teacher, student and community curricular work. This negotiation became fundamental to the project of delivering socially just second chance schooling to young people. It required us

to privilege (1) relational engagement work, (2) teacher and student activism, (3) critical praxis and (4) new experiments in turnaround pedagogies illustrated in figure 2 above.

Relational engagement work

Enacting highly attuned relational engagement work was integral to addressing the engagement challenge across all of the SCCC developmental areas throughout the research; with the students, the community stakeholders and with members of the ULPLC. For us, offering re-engaging practice with the students meant acting with relational engagement intent (Smyth, 2008) to allow students to find a sense of place within the SCCC in their own time.

> …start with the lives, experiences and aspirations of those groups in society that have been actively excluded and left behind by the experience of schooling, and allowing them to meaningfully reinsert themselves back into education on their terms. (Smyth, 2008, p. 4)

One year on, SCCC had grown from 35 students to 70 students. Situated on the TAFE campus, free from the constraints and imposed behaviour surveillance technologies of the mainstream secondary school, the students regularly told us how they enjoyed the adult learning culture and the freedom to participate in learning like university students. Behaviour incidents became a rarity. Attendance was voluntary and their learning engagement depended on us offering a schooling experience that was meaningful to them and caring. They would attend tutorials and classroom lectures, study in the community library accessing their computers and resources, and work on and off campus according to each student's personalised timetable.

Teacher and student activism

Developing new community-based relationships to enable socially just schooling to flourish was time-consuming but essential work for us. Teacher and student involvement in networked community-based political action (Roman & Eyre, 1997) secured some regional funding for our second chance schooling endeavour. Meanwhile, our students would recruit other young people into the college and formally present at various community youth forums highlighting the need for community and government to offer recurrent funding for the SCCC. This networked political action involved us in partnership with the college's students projecting community youth issues in the local media and speaking to local government committees to build community-wide awareness. This approach eventually led to funding (after 5 years of campaigning) for a permanent purpose-built learning facility on the TAFE campus.

> Recasting teacher professionalism in a more activist form calls for new kinds of social and professional relationships where different parts of the broader educational enterprise work together in strategic ways. …trust conceptualised towards activist ends requires debating and negotiating a shared set of values, principles and strategies. (Sachs, 2003)

Towards critical praxis

Through our involvement in the ULPLC, critical action research methodology became an aspirational research methodology for us. We were confronted with our own (un)critical praxis in promoting a vocational curriculum in our beginning action research experiments. Through conversations promoting research as praxis (Lather, 1986), and more affirming views of students as capable of deeper forms of learning, we moved professionally into a more socially critical direction, promoting a curriculum that was co-constructed with students. Our ULPLC involvement helped us to disrupt the beginning socially unjust and constraining vocational logic of the SCCC and moved us into a schooling trajectory that positioned our students as active participants in their community using community as a curricular springboard.

Turnaround pedagogies

During the ULPLC meetings curricular and pedagogical connectedness to student lifeworlds was introduced to us as a concept for the first time. Lifeworld is the social world as subjectively experienced, and communicated, as acted in and acted upon (Roche, 1987). Within this concept lay new pedagogical and curricular potential to enact 'pedagogical justice' (Hattam & Zipin 2009) in the classroom by bringing student lifeworlds into the heart of SCCC school design.

> Any project that hopes to address the problem of cultural capital must focus on pedagogies that start to connect school-based learning with students' own lifeworlds in their communities. (Hattam and Zipin, 2009, p. 299)

This approach declared that the difficult codes of the curriculum needed to be made more explicit to our students in engaging ways (codes that were easily understood by more privileged students). This introduced a sophisticated intellectual dimension to our pedagogical work. We subsequently invited the students to co-construct new curricula making their life-worlds the curricular centrepiece for learning (Shor, 2012). This meant we took seriously student's 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992), the knowledge young people bring with them into the classroom from their lives outside of schooling, and then creatively developed learning activities cognisant of these 'funds'.

We progressed the SCCC curricular work by incorporating the 'Foxfire' student magazine approach (Wigginton, 1986) used by a reformist teacher in the USA in the 1980s. We found that the senior years' curriculum offered enough flexibility to thematically integrate different subjects around topical community-based issues. Gaining local council support and funding for a youth magazine became the catalyst for doing this. Topical community-based themes quickly emerged for the students. Students were now attending to a curriculum that acknowledged what they brought to the classroom in their 'virtual school bag' (Thomson, 2002) and they were leading out on the basis of this learning as journalists undertaking community research and presenting their research in the magazine which was made available to the public through the community library. By making community curricular, the school work of the students promoted community understandings of youth issues.

NEOLIBERAL WORLD

Through pursuing critical action research methodology, sustained and informed through our ULPLC involvement, we came to recognise the insidious influence of neoliberalism or economic rationalism as it is also known upon our work. It has three intertwined manifestations: (1) an ideology (2) a mode of governance and (3) a policy package (Steger & Roy, 2010) and presents as our era's dominant common sense (Gamble, 2009). This dominant ideology drove our initial vocational curricular agenda. Neoliberal ideology manifested in our subjective professional selves and in the public policy mandates that infused our beginning work across the action zones of schooling. These influences were unrecognised and missing from the figure 1 'School Design Conceptual'. The influence of neoliberalism now featured in a reconstituted 'School design conceptual' (figure 3 below) as a powerful force that can penetrate all aspects of school design work if not recognised.
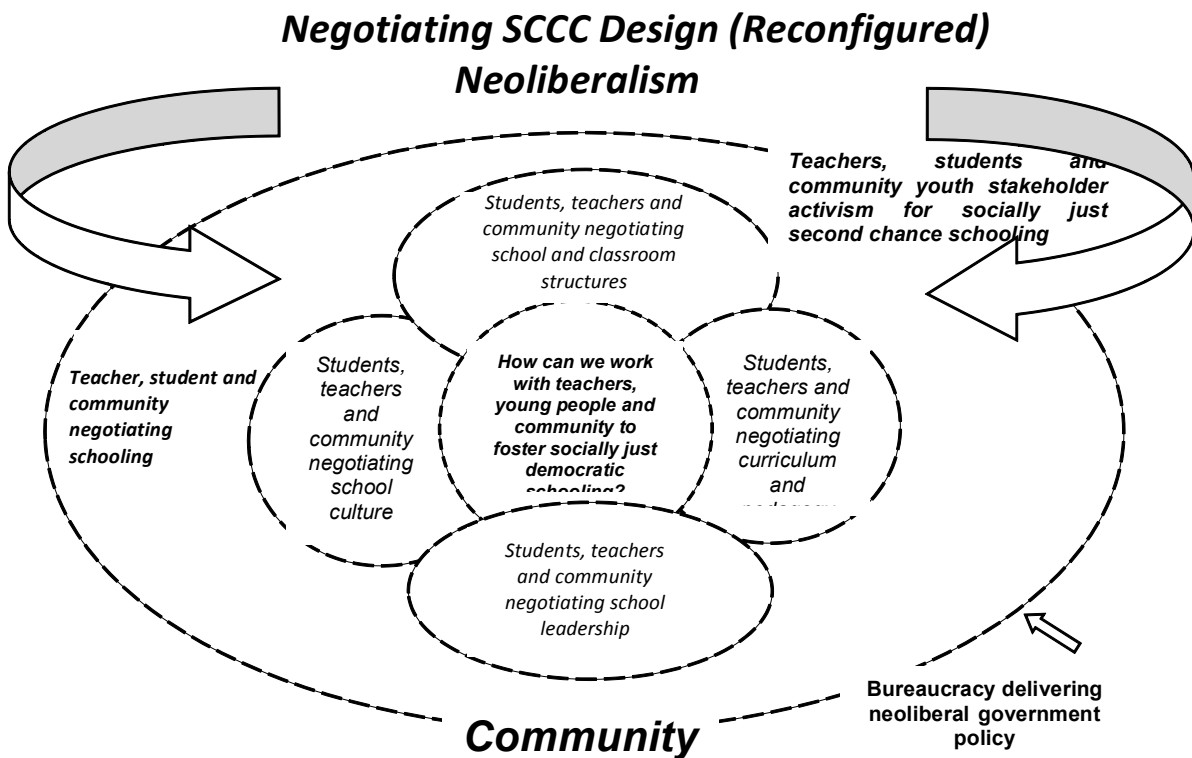

Fig 3 The `School Design Conceptual' reconfigured, illustrating the new SCCC schooling action zones. The conceptual illustrates how we viewed the (re)engagement initiative at the conclusion of the research.

We subsequently worked to ensure that our schooling approach was not about offering low level curriculum, but rather higher level curriculum that provided opportunities for university entry, higher education training post school and secure apprenticeships. We went further than the curricular dimension. We negotiated and embedded student lifeworlds as a SCCC design principle. This meant SCCC design was informed by young people's views of

what schooling should be like. It meant taking seriously their lived experiences and how these lived experiences translated into more just structural, cultural and pedagogical schooling action zones. If we got it wrong, the students would tell us by simply not attending. A phone call and ensuing conversation would often get us quickly 'back on track'.

CONCLUSION

In attending to the student engagement work that lay at the heart of this action research project, three engagement themes loomed large; one about our professional and highly personal learning journey from uncritical to more critical praxis as teachers engaged in critical action research to develop a socially just second chance school (Lather, 1986; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998); another about the complexity and possibility of doing innovative engagement work with marginalised students in neoliberal times (Lingard & Mills, 2007); and a third about the pragmatic possibilities and hope offered through engaging in teacher activism to influence systemic change (Sachs, 2003). Impacting upon all three of these engagement work areas at all times was the insidious influence of neoliberal public policy. These three themes intertwined and interspersed throughout our school reform endeavours, intersecting our action research endeavours at various critical junctures. Consequently, our student (re)engagement in learning work required constant vigilance to all three themes and tactically navigating ways through the various manifestations of neoliberal public policy.

The research made inroads into offering a more engaging and empowering schooling approach for marginalised students `beyond the school gate.' Through the research, the young people participating were re-joined to the educational project and as a consequence, provided with greater life opportunities through their credentialed formalised learning experiences. The research also demonstrated how intellectually, emotionally and physically challenging it is to negotiate and build a new school. It also confirmed that teachers can make a significant difference to the lives of young people no longer participating in schooling through embarking upon socially just schooling change across their community informed by critical action research methodology.

However, in all of our work, we were unsuccessful in effecting socially just school change 'inside the school gate' at GHS. This warrants further investigation. For us, the systemic challenge for more socially just schooling inside secondary schools still remains. We argue that this systemic challenge can best be articulated by seeking responses from students to the following question: *What are secondary school students saying about their experiences of conventional schooling and what would they like to see changed?* Doing school justice will require systemic attention to this question and a socially just systemic response to the views expressed by students attending public secondary schools.

Finally, South Australian educational leader, Garth Boomer, who headed the teaching and learning areas within the Department of Education in South Australia during the 1990s articulated through published research the need to ensure socially just schooling flourishes. He argued for more equal power relations between teachers and students in schools and negotiated curricular

approaches. He invoked the call for the 'pragmatic radical' teacher in the 1990s, and in doing this he incited all educators to be 'people who can read their world critically and with subtlety, who can act individually and collectively to defend themselves and change things, and who have a highly developed drive to bring about higher levels of justice and democracy in society' (1999, p. 53).

Becoming more of the 'radical pragmatic' in our work with marginalised students called us into collaborative, tactical and critical teacher work informed by critical action research within a ULPLC to navigate through constraining neoliberal public policy with students and colleagues, reassembling our professional selves and radically changing the SCCC design from the design logics of conventional secondary schools.

Our work in developing and leading a socially just second chance schooling initiative demanded that we listened to our students, understood the constraining logics of conventional schooling and partnered with our young people, community youth stakeholders and our ULPLC colleagues to reconfigure SCCC schooling structures, cultures and pedagogies in alignment with student lifeworlds. Boomer's notion of `negotiating the curriculum' was extended to a 'negotiating schooling' approach in our research which required students, teachers and community stakeholders working collaboratively to develop the SCCC.

POSTSCRIPT

The SCCC has been operational for twelve years. It has catered for a cohort of over a 100 students in recent years, aged from 15 to 21 years. Over the 12 years of operation it has received an 'SA Great' Youth Initiative Award, various research grants and positive recognition from the State Ministers for Education. After six years of operation, the SCCC secured its own building and was formally recognised as a community-based second chance college, eligible for recurrent government funding. In 2013 it won a national award for community-based approaches to schooling.

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