“Under pressure I fall back to being a teacher…” Confronting Contending Desires for Schooling and Teaching in a Middle School Reform Project

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Abstract

This article examines a Victorian high school's implementation of a new Year 9 program which was intended to interrupt a traditional academic curriculum and to create an imagined oasis of care and personal development for students. It explores ways in which (1) the existing culture and context of the school continues to frame the subjectivities of teachers, students and parents in relation to the new program, (2) the attempt to preserve a competitive academic traditional orientation alongside an alternative approach is a central dilemma for this school, and (3) the new relationships between teachers and students are experienced by them as an interplay of pleasure and surveillance, connection and discipline. The article argues that the conflicts and pressures experienced by the teachers and students are not simply local and contingent ones but indicative of wider tensions in current Australian education policy.

This article draws on a year-long study of one high school program initiated to reform middle years teaching in the school, and the hopes and experiences of teachers working on this reform. We explore what happened in this reform initiative in terms of the tensions these teachers experience in relation to different drivers of school culture for them, particularly in relation to demands to do well in a competitive academic system and the desire for middle school to have a different kind of agenda. We explore, too, the inherent tensions both students and teachers feel when there is a stronger emphasis on the person and on each other as persons. These are situated pressures that reflect the culture of this particular school, but they also illustrate some broader issues that are being experienced in all schools in Australia in this particular period.

In Australia, "Year 9" is widely seen as a problem, a time when young people disengage from school; and when curriculum and student identity often fail to cohere with each other. A number of major reports and government-sponsored projects (Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002; Cole, Mahar, & Vindurampulle, 2006; Cumming & Cormack, 1996; Department of Education Employment and Training, 1999) have reviewed evidence on this issue, and have recommended alternative and integrated curriculum approaches for this phase of schooling, and much of the academic literature on this issue takes a similar direction (Campagna, Comber, Comber, Cormack, Dilena, & Perkins,1989; Cormack, 1998; Braggett, Day, & Morris, 1999; Hill & Russell, 1999; Luke, 2003; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003; Bahr & Pendergast, 2005; Carrington, 2006). Many schools, particularly private schools, have developed some elements of curriculum reform for this stage of schooling, often involving elements of relocation and of introducing new challenges for students, project work, engagement with non-school communities.

This article draws on research that studied one government high school in its first year of embarking on a major program of change to curriculum, timetabling, organization and staffing of Year 9. Both researchers spent time in the school at least once a month over the year and observed classes and staff meetings; and talked to and revisited teachers, students and principal, sometimes in semi-structured individual and group interviews, and sometimes in casual conversations. We collected documents relating to the program and had access to other evidence that was being collected about it by others, both by the teachers themselves and also by the education department and by another researcher who was in the school for another purpose. One of us had also previously spent extensive time in the school over the previous decade as part of an earlier longitudinal project (McLeod & Yates 2006; Yates & McLeod, 2007).

In the account that follows, we begin with an overview of the origins and shape of the reform and its connection to government data-driven agendas of school improvement as well as to these teachers' own consensus that successful reform at this level requires "doing things differently" and a more personal approach. We then go on to explore a number of tensions experienced by those involved in the program and ways in which these represent different and at times conflicting agendas about what a good school and a good teaching practice should look like, in terms of the history (and previous success) of this school; in terms of the students' and parents' and teachers' desires both to be fully engaged and also to be less than fully open to scrutiny; and in terms of the overall policy imperatives that focus overall on competitive measures of hard data, but also suggest that middle high school, in particular, needs to have a different kind of meaning for students.

In terms of approaches to Year 9, some previous Australian literature concerned with inequalities and schooling has argued for a need to "break the mould of the 'scripted' teacher" and find ways of rejecting the "competitive academic curriculum" (Smyth, et al., 2003). Smyth, McInerney and Hattam argue that the "teacher-as-improviser" should enact a new process "where the lives of students are brought into the script", and they draw parallels with Fielding's distinction between the "effective school" (transmission model) and the "person-centred school" (Fielding, 2000). These writers are concerned with drop-outs and the marginalised and want to emphasise how schools should do things differently. However, the school which is discussed in this article is not, overall, perceived by its community as one that is failing. Features of the school that Smyth et al.'s argument would argue should be abandoned are features that draw both parents and students to this school.

In a previous longitudinal study Yates & McLeod showed that the traditional competitive culture of the school in this study was producing valuable outcomes for a number of the students from non-advantaged backgrounds in terms of their achievement and orientation beyond school (Yates & McLeod, 2000, 2007; McLeod & Yates, 2006). At the same time, that research showed (and teachers and students acknowledged) problems that emerge from that competitive emphasis, in terms of students feeling uncared for, and dropping out of school. The teachers who initiated and carried out the reform that we studied here aimed to do something different about Year 9 *without abandoning traditional characteristics of the school that they still value*. They wanted to interrupt the traditional competitive academic approach that they saw dominating the school culture overall, and to create what they saw as an oasis of care within that. But they did not want that oasis to weaken the overall school successes that they continued to value. They wanted to have "both/and" rather than "either" the competitive academic agenda, "or" an alternative personal curriculum that turns away from it.

A striking emphasis of most of the government-sponsored reports and other literature on Year 9 focuses on students and their needs. What receives very little attention is the demands on teachers in doing things differently, including issues relating to their own identity. The study we carried out was an opportunity to follow teachers' own experiences and responses when they attempt to make some quite radical changes to how they operate as teachers.

Beginnings of the Reform

Victoria High School (a pseudonym, henceforth abbreviated as VHS) is a school with a "traditional" school culture, which emphasises academic and sporting achievement, comparison with private schools, individual effort and responsibility, and traditional "chalk and talk" pedagogy. It is a school with a good reputation in its community, but

a place where teachers themselves, prior to the reform initiative studied here, were concerned about student disengagement, uneven attendance and drop-out in the middle school phase, a concern that was reinforced by the student attitude data now gathered systematically by the Victorian Education Department, and fed back to schools as part of a program of ongoing school improvement. As one teacher explained in our first interviews,

> "for a number of years a number of teachers have been dissatisfied with what's happening with Year 9's, what we do, and what we do with them".

Another teacher added,

> "a school survey […] showed Year 9 kids were our **worst** as far as engagement, **worst** as far as attendance. The school realised that it is time we followed a lot of other programmes at other schools and did something at Year 9".

In 2005, VHS gained funding to release four teachers to investigate Year 9 innovations at other schools, and to design a new program for VHS, to be introduced in 2006. The opportunity to gain this funding in part reflected the school's previous history as competitively successful relative to other schools in its area (it was able to access a *Leading Schools Fund*) and in part the interest of the current government in supporting some school-based programs of reform (part of the funding came from a *Teacher Professional Development Fund*). The Year 9 reform, later named the "ARCH Program", was seen by all as a major new initiative in the school's curriculum.

The main features of the reform identified by the teachers were both structural and personal:

- Year 9 was to be timetabled and located separately (and teachers saw this as having an important symbolic function as well as being a necessary practical arrangement). Normally teachers in a school like this would teach their particular subject across different year levels. The timetabling and housing arrangement located this program as different from the rest of the school.
- As part of a deliberate attempt to create connection, and a community who knew each other better, each class was to have its own room rather than move to different rooms for different subjects; and was to have the same two teachers for all core subjects. (In other parts of the school, the students moved from room to room as they took on different subjects. In this program, the students were to stay in their room, and the teachers moved to them.)

- Teachers had to apply to be part of the program. Teaching in this phase of high school was previously (and is normally) seen by teachers as the least desirable level to work in: people prefer the serious subject-centredness of the senior years, or the openness and greater malleability of the junior years. Asking teachers to apply to be involved in the project was both a selection mechanism and a way of countering the perspective on Year 9 as "last choice" teaching option.
- One day per week was timetabled using only core teachers, so that off campus excursions and activities could readily be scheduled.
- Diary-writing and personal reflection was to be a central focus of the curriculum. The year was to begin with a number of activities designed to have the students think about themselves and their learning styles, for example by having them do the Myer-Briggs inventory; and a regular component of the program was to be a weekly reflective diary by the students, that would be read and commented on by the teachers.

The acronym the teachers chose for the new program was ARCH (active, resilient, connected, happy) and comments made by core teachers in our first taped interview in January 2006, before the school year began, indicated their intention to develop a program in which students were happier, and also one in which they would learn a new way of relating to their learning:

> *(Researcher) What do you hope they'll get out of it?*
>
> "…a greater understanding of the purpose of learning, and how they learn… so will be better learners, more active learners for Year 12. So they won't be looking to the teacher all the time for their learning". (*Male teacher 1*)
>
> "On the character aspect, we hope they are able to cope better. … Resilient skills... to be refreshed... This will be a break, an oasis". (*Male teacher 2*)
>
> We want them to have a happy year. (*Female teacher*)

From our interviews, observations and student and parent survey evidence collected over the year, teachers, students and parents all thought the program did succeed in getting teachers to know students better, and to engage students more, and teachers felt it had been challenging but had re-energised their own engagement with teaching, and also their ability to draw support from each other. But the attempt to "interrupt" the culture of the school was also a strain in many ways, and we want to consider some ways these strains were experienced.

Physical and Symbolic Arrangements and the Culture of this School

In our first visits, we were struck by the extent to which the teacher and student narratives about their experience of the new program dwelt on the physical arrangements. Here we consider some symbolic meanings as well as practical effects of buildings, dress, location and movement in the changes.

At this school, appearance, reputation and sporting success matter, both to the town and to the school community. In a previous longitudinal study at the school conducted by one of the researchers, students repeatedly cited the quality of the buildings and sporting facilities as the main feature that distinguished this school from other government schools in this city. In Year 7 in that earlier study, when different students were asked "what do you think this school thinks is important?", they had repeatedly mentioned "how you appear to the public", referring to the constant attention by teachers to correct uniform and behaviour on the way to and from school (Yates, 1999; Yates & McLeod 2007). The school takes part in many sporting and music competitions, and often makes reference to "school spirit" in its newsletters and announcements to students.

Reforming while immersed in a traditional school culture is difficult. The Year 9 teacher group were very conscious of instituting a new "team" via symbols, and jackets and room decoration. One of the first things that the teachers did in developing the program was to give it a name and develop a logo, and the core teachers wore jackets with the program logo. (Teachers in this state do not normally wear clothing with corporate identifiers.) They worked on building "ownership" and competition between classes by giving immediate attention to involving them in decorating their home room (and encouraging some friendly rivalry between home rooms). All this sat comfortably with the culture of the school and incorporated key elements of that school's existing culture: competition and pride in appearance. The name chosen for the program was an acronym, ARCH (active, resilient, connected, happy) – but it is also an existing symbol of this school (*The Arch* was previously the name of the school magazine because the school is located near the Arch of Victory, a monument commemorating war service of men from this town).

However, what the school had learned to value clashed with a lack of adequate building infrastructure for the new program. The Year 9 program in this first year was housed in a run-down building that is due for refurbishment, so it felt rather derelict, even though this meant that each class could decorate their own room as they wished, and did so. We noted earlier that both students and staff frequently identify this as a "good" school by referring to the quality of its sporting fields and buildings, so to be located in an old and run-down block was an unwelcome part of the attempt to interrupt the school

culture and do things differently. Despite the best efforts of teachers, the building was not a place students could easily be proud of. However it may have eased the relations with teachers not in the program where there was an element of jealousy about some of the attention and special treatment associated with the reform (another aspect of introducing this reform that is outside the scope of the present paper).

At the beginning of the year, the teachers produced a booklet, *Our Mission*, setting out aims and guidelines for the new program, and its opening pages speak to the hopes of the program for a new kind of relationship with students and outcomes for them:

> *Our Mission is to . . .*
> Improve the relationships that develop between students and teachers, implement progressive approaches to teaching and learning, and use team work to develop exciting and meaningful student-centred learning experiences . . .
> If we can do this – we will have teachers and students who are
> ACTIVE – in their learning
> RESILIENT – prepared to meet new challenges
> CONNECTED – to their learning, peers and community
> HAPPY – about being at school.

But the longest section in the booklet is about regulation and discipline, not new hopes, and reflects the traditional culture of the school, in terms of its obsession with discipline and appearance and "how you appear to the public". This section defines in micro-detail a list of potential student infringements of the uniform code and the precise steps to be taken by teachers in dealing with each. For example:

> **Jewellery**
> 1. First time – warning, remove in front of Coordinator.
> 2. Second time – confiscated for one week.
> 3. Repeat refusal – clean up detention.
>
> **Shorts** [that is, wearing short trousers rather than long ones]
> 1. First time – warning by the two Coordinators.
> 2. Second time – phone call, clean up detention.

The ARCH program was explicitly intended to be different, more personal, with different activities and different relationships between teachers and students. In some cases teachers were highly conscious of what they were attempting to reject and what they were attempting to retain of the school's traditional culture. They recognised that the attempt to have a less didactic and formal curriculum, and to have more personalised relations with students, would require bridges and explanations for parents and other

parts of the school. They were clear that they remained committed to some elements of the school's traditional culture: they did want the program to be advancing students academically and preparing them for later years; and they were happy to take on the friendly competitive rivalries that characterised many elements of school life. But the emphasis on micro-regulation of student appearance in *Our Mission* went unremarked by the teachers. This element of their taken-for-granted values as part of that school did not appear to be visible to them.

During the year we saw other examples of parents and students and even the core teachers themselves worrying about the disappearance of certain signs of learning and structure that had been marked as important by the school. For example, in a parent survey we discuss in the next section, alongside a long list of highly favourable responses about the reform and its positive benefits for the students, respondents expressed some concerns about the apparent reduction in formal homework and about the future transition back to regular classes:

> "He enjoys coming to school. I do wonder how he might settle into Year 10 next year."
> "Where is the homework?" [underlined by the parent]

On each visit we began the day with a group interview with the four teachers who had been leading the initiative about what had been happening, and about their own feelings about various aspects of the work (and about themselves as teachers) at that point in the program. From these conversations too, it appeared that the teachers worried constantly about whether they had enough structure and formal learning in their program (especially in terms of science).

Movement as a Symbolic Identity Issue

Students liked having an opportunity to have their own room and have a say in the decoration of it – but hated not moving between classes. For the students, not moving between classes reduces the amount of "time-out" in their day – time when they were not under scrutiny, not regulated:

David Well, I would say, about 50% love the programme, and about 50% don't. I used to love moving around classrooms, because, when you don't you are stuck in one room.

[Later in that interview, David and his friends describe their "best experience" as an excursion to the city, when they were allowed to spend some time by themselves without the teacher present.]

For many of the students we talked to, not moving between classes has strong psychological associations with being in primary school rather than secondary, with regressing:

Researchers
How do you like the year?

Luigi I really like it. I didn't initially – I felt like it was back in primary. Now we are closer. I like all the things we are doing. Year 9 was a nothing year anyway.

Barry The same. I worried a bit at first about being back in primary.

In the state where this study took place, programs are often set up to help students negotiate what is seen as a difficult transition from the familiar primary school environment to a larger and more complex secondary school. These programs tend to emphasise moving between classes and the complexity of timetabling as a feature of high school, of the bigger and more complex world students will be required to find their way in. The need to take responsibility for yourself rather than be cared for by a teacher is portrayed as a key element of being at high school rather than primary school (Yates, 1999). The resulting interpretations by students of the meaning of the schooling experience: their association of particular arrangements of movement, or assemblages, with particular stages of schooling, is thus a constructed one, one relative to a particular context and history rather than an inevitable association. Nevertheless it is psychologically powerful in framing the way many students interpret what they are doing in school.

Being a Person and Being a Teacher or Student: Caring, Surveillance and Relationship

> "Under pressure I fall back to being a teacher; and that's where I know that things aren't going so well". (*Male teacher, one month into new program*)
>
> "They know far more about me than other classes would from other years… I tell them about what I would have done when I was their age, and what I did last weekend, whereas I wouldn't have done that before. This is as much about staff, ARCH, as it is the kids…" (*Male teacher, early in program*)
>
> "We know our teachers a lot better this year". (*Female student, fourth month of school year*)

> "We have to write in this journal… that's OK, but then teachers get to read it… that annoys me, because it is good to express how you feel but you don't want them to read it". (*Female student (2), group interview*)

Researcher

What did that mean for you? You know, where you got a report and thought, "this guy knows me"?

Female student

It was like, they were not just a teacher, like, they were trying to…

Male student

Like to tell you, you went really well, it was good.

Female student

You feel like your work mattered, and it was good to get it in and get feedback.

The emphasis on the personal and interpersonal in schooling and on finding ways for teachers and students to relate to each other more as human beings has been a persistent theme in many strands of progressive education (for example, Neill, 1953, 1968; Noddings, 2003) and enquiries on boys and education in Australia have found that one of the things they most dislike about secondary school is the feeling of just being processed without any regard for who they are as individuals (Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002; Yates, 1999). Equally, particularly in recent decades, critical analysts of schooling have been much taken with the Foucauldian-influenced perspective that this emphasis on the personal should be seen as a form of discipline, a technology, a "discipline of the self" (for example, Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Hunter, 1994; Rose, 1989).

Knowing students better was one aim of this Year 9 reform, as it is of many popular Year 9 alternative programs in Australia, and, in a different way, of the current overarching government education policy in this state, which calls for individual diagnostic learning plans to be developed for each student. What was evident from interviews over the course of the year, for both students and teachers, was the interplay of pleasure and resentment about being required to bring more of oneself into the institutional frame. Equally evident was the sense in which this reform was as much about the teachers as it was about the students. The initiative was self-consciously seen by the teachers involved as a form of renewal or refreshment; and the *Our Mission* statement, quoted earlier, was explicit that the ARCH agenda (being "active, resilient, connected and happy") was intended for teachers as well as students.

Both because of the organizational arrangements (core teachers taught fewer students overall and spent much more time with those they taught) and the curriculum content (including the diary work and the more informal out of school activities), teachers had a more detailed sense of each individual student they taught, and this was repeatedly praised by parents in response to a survey we conducted later in the year:

> "Having two teachers that know her very well is a great positive".
> "Both teachers have picked out the positives/negatives and have discussed them honestly and openly with me. I have appreciated this more than the usual 'everything is fine' etc".
>
> "I like the idea of being able to contact the teacher when needed".
>
> "Very positive – lots of feedback and follow through".
>
> "Better engagement/communication than previous years. Personalised approach seems to take account of individual issues/needs".
>
> "Teachers seem to know my child better than in previous years".
>
> "A great improvement on last year".
>
> (*from answers to a brief written survey of parents distributed after the mid-year parent-teacher interviews*)[1]

The teachers, too, greatly valued this closer relationship and knowledge of the students they taught:

> *What stands out for you about the first few weeks?*
>
> "The things they tell us…"
>
> "I know the kids so much better…"
>
> "The fact that I could write a report about each kid in my class, without looking at a photo. I'd know the kid easily, and write half a page easily. In other years, I would have to look at the class photos [and say] who was that kid?"
>
> "They just like to feel like they are being heard. At the beginning of the year, [they] felt they were being told "you just have to have fun and enjoy it" – now are initiating more"
>
> "They know far more about me than other classes would from other years… I tell them about what I would have done when I was their age, and what I did last weekend, whereas I wouldn't have done that before. This is as much about staff, ARCH, as it is the kids…"
>
> (*from audio-taped conversation in March with the four core teachers*)

However, both teachers and students also identified new surveillance and disciplinary demands this reformed approach made on them, and felt they were under scrutiny in a new way. For example, a number of students complained about how quickly teachers now followed up with parents about problems and absences. They also recognised the personal as being a quite direct form of discipline in some comments about the diary-writing:

> "We have to write in this journal… that's OK, but then teachers get to read it… that annoys me, because it is good to express how you feel but you don't want them to read it". (*Female student, 5 May*)

And a teacher commented

> "You know if they've done something wrong, it's just unavoidable, it doesn't matter, because they are going to get caught, so they can see that. They can see it. There is just no point in doing that (naughty thing), you are going to get caught. They can't just forget about it. They know we are on to them".

The teachers also felt much closer scrutiny themselves – both by fellow teachers and by the students. They commented about the pressure of having to confront "failing" lessons because they could no longer move on to a different class. One teacher's poignant account of a "disastrous" week stays in our minds: worried that he was failing his class on every level all week, he tried to rescue the situation. He had his class gather in a circle and pass a tennis ball around. Whoever was holding the tennis ball, could tell him what they felt was wrong with his style and how he could improve.

In our interviews teachers talked frequently about the support they gained from each other, but they were also very aware of themselves as part of a group who to some extent were involved in mutual surveillance. Mid-way through the year, quite independently of our own research, the teachers decided to conduct their own survey of their team, asking questions such as "*Have you spoken negatively to someone else regarding your core partner this term*?" and "*Could you challenge another member of the team's behaviour if you thought it was against the group's agreed values/behaviours*?"

For teachers, the implicit contract in which they now were engaging with students emphasised the teacher/student relationship as a personal and interpersonal one rather than a positional (institutional) one.

> "Under pressure I fall back to being a teacher; and that's where I know that things aren't going so well". (*Male teacher, May interview)*

> "I'm finding it hard to stay fresh and enthusiastic when I am tired. And with these kids I think it is more important than with other groups,

> because if you show you are tired and can't be bothered, then they respond to that so trying to stay energetic when you are not is hard". (*Female teacher, May interview)*

Concluding Reflections

In any attempt to change curriculum or to "do things differently" there will be pragmatic issues, that are often temporary. For this particular program, such issues included the physical arrangements for the program; the amount of work to be done and the lack of time to adequately do the designing of a dramatically different curriculum in its first year. But in this article we have been attempting to elucidate and illustrate two issues that this particular reform evokes and that are not merely ephemeral issues related to the process of change.

One issue is that of how a program emphasising the personal, "real life experiences", "doing things differently" will be experienced in the context of a school and schooling culture where auditing, competitive assessment, visible formality and pride in appearances, and measurable education outcomes have been so strongly emphasised. If middle school is to be "done differently", schools (and schooling) need to find ways of bridging the different sets of expectations. To quite a large extent the positive reputation of this school for parents, students and teachers related to its being seen as "like a private school": having high quality facilities, an academic emphasis, and high discipline standards in relation to uniform and "how you appear to the public". Formality was emphasised in both artefacts of school life (uniform, events such as assemblies and speech days) and in the belief that this school was strong on traditions including traditional forms of curriculum. It is a school that likes to differentiate itself from other government schools in the town, which are seen as more lax in terms of uniform and appearance and standards. As the teachers also know, and the student survey data shows, many of the very things that construct this as a good school are experienced as alienating by students in the middle years of high school, and contribute to absences, disengagement, and dropping out during this time. The approaches being taken in the Year 9 ARCH reform are widely promoted in the state as a better way to do Year 9, but for this school, they have the problem of being seen to move in a direction that is moving away from the characteristics that construct this school as a "good" one.

The second issue relates to the personal and to issues of discipline or surveillance. Teachers and students are in a particular institutional and legal relationship to each other: the idea that they can now relate to each other simply as people is, sociologically at least, an illusion. And there is no doubt that the pedagogic devices, whether they are diaries, or outside activities, or discussion forums, are designed to

discipline, to shape individuals in particular ways. Ann Oakley (1980) once wrote about interviewing that the traditional interview relationship was based on a fraud: to seduce the interviewee by transmitting a human warmth in order to serve quite other instrumental purposes. However, in the case of teaching, teachers and students are thrown together with each other for very long periods of time, and the way in which the personal and human warmth is part of the interaction is not simply a strategic and instrumental tool but of consequence for those involved, both students and teachers (O'Loughlin, 2006). As Barber (2002) noted, "teacher caring" has largely been investigated only in the context of primary school or of secondary students with problems. The pedagogic questions raised by the present study are about how to have some human connection in a culture and structure that does also give these disciplinary effects.

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Endnote

[1] The survey included a short set of attitude questions (with a 5 point scale), which demonstrated overall very strong support for the program as it affected their child. The comments quoted here come from three open-ended questions that followed the closed ones:
Please answer the following short answer questions:
(1) Have you seen any changes towards school in your son or daughter this year? Please comment.
(2) What have been the positives and/or negatives of school for your child this year?
(3) How have you felt about the parent-teacher interviews?

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