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The human face of 'effective schooling' for marginalised young women.

Kitty te Riele
University of Technology Sydney, Australia
kitty.teriele@uts.edu.au

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Abstract

Marginalisation from schooling is a key component of broader educational and social marginalisation of young women. This paper aims to contribute to a transformative agenda for schools. Drawing on research with students and teachers at two alternative senior secondary schools, this paper argues that successful teaching and learning in these settings relied on a recognition of teaching as a caring profession and of the emotional dimension of schooling – both in the relationship of individual teachers with students and in the culture of the school as a whole. These findings provide evidence for 'practice-with-hope', as they point to possibilities for schools to make a difference.

Introduction

The last few decades have seen policy concern to extend the period of formal education of young people in Australia, including an increased retention to the end of senior secondary schooling (Aquilina,1997; Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991; Federal Coalition 2001; Latham, 2004; MCEETYA, 2003). Policy directions and suggestions on how to achieve this have variously focused on coercive measures (e.g. Newman and Vanstone, 1996), on changes to the curriculum (e.g. Aquilina, 1997) and on schooling and teaching practices (e.g. HRSCEET, 1996). This paper is concerned with the latter approach.

Young people likely to leave formal education earlier than currently considered politically, socially and economically desirable by federal and state governments in Australia are referred to as 'youth-at-risk'. Identification of these young people often focuses on personal attributes which make them more susceptible to educational 'failure', such as homelessness, family dysfunction, pregnancy and 'individual and family perceptions of the future and the role schooling plays in it' (Paterson, 1995, p. 12) or on

group attributes such as 'children's race, gender, class, first language, family makeup, and environment' (Swadener and Lubeck, 1995, p. 25).

In order to redirect attention from deficiencies in students and their families to critical reflection on the processes of schooling, this paper adopts the terms 'marginalised students' rather than 'youth-at-risk'. This concept identifies individuals not through their personal characteristics but through their relationship with schooling and allows recognition that marginalisation is 'a product of the institutions, systems and culture(s) we create and sustain' (Smyth et al., 2000, p.4). Use of this term contributes to 'practice-with-hope', within the framework of critical pragmatism (Young, 1997; 1998).

Schools have diverse, ambiguous and contradictory purposes and effects. As argued by Gewirtz (2003), there has been a growing recognition within the sociology of education that schools not only contribute to reproduction but also have the potential to contribute to more socially just practices. Using the narratives of two young women, Jane and Michelle, this paper highlights the possibilities for schools not only to contribute to marginalisation, but also to inclusion and (re-) engagement of students.

Students' marginalisation by schooling can be "as much a struggle for the schools and teachers as it is for the young people" (Smyth and Hattam, 2001, p. 403). The findings presented here are therefore not intended to blame teachers and schools, but rather form part of an attempt to look at school effectiveness for marginalised students in a complex way, contributing, in Leeman and Volman's (2001) terms to a quest rather than a recipe book for a more inclusive education.

Jane and Michelle attended two different Senior Colleges in NSW in 2000, referred to here as Sapphire Senior College and Ruby Senior College. Both Senior Colleges evolved from mainstream Year 7 to Year 12 high schools in the mid 1990s, and are aimed at providing 'second chance' education. The Colleges are part of the public school system in New South Wales and offer programs for Year 10, 11 and 12. Students have to be 15

years or older to enrol. Ages range from 15 to 60, but most students are aged between 15-19 years.

The Senior Colleges differ from some of the other Senior Colleges and Collegiates in the state (and around the country) in that a large number of their students are in some ways marginalised from mainstream education. However, the population of the Colleges was not socially homogenous. Some students attended private or selective public schools previously, and some came from relatively wealthy families. The factor which united all students across a wide range of previous educational experiences, is that their needs were not met in mainstream high schools.

The findings presented here are mostly based on interviews with Jane and Michelle, but complemented with results from a student survey, interviews with other students and with staff, and college documentation. Jane and Michelle are pseudonyms, used to identify their narratives and quotes from their interviews. Quotes from other students are also identified through first name pseudonyms while quotes from teachers are referred to with last name pseudonyms. Quotes from the student survey are identified through codes (which indicate the College).

Two young women

Jane

At the time of interviewing her in 2000, Jane was 17. She had a rocky school history, and had been moving between living with her mum and living independently. Her mum had left school before Year 10, and worked in casual jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment. Jane was expelled from a public high school at the beginning of Year 9.

Several years after the event, Jane still vividly described the event leading to her expulsion. She said she was sitting down to eat her lunch when another girl 'got shitty' with her. A group of fellow students gathered around and encouraged Jane to hit the

other girl. She claimed she refused to do so, but the commotion attracted the attention of a teacher:

> The Year 9 adviser came up and told me to go to his office, and I said 'No' because I didn't think it was fair that I was getting into trouble when it wasn't even my fault. He said 'Why not?' and I said 'Because this is my time'. He said 'Go to the principal's office, and I said 'Why?'. He said 'Because I told you to'. I said 'I don't want to - if I do he'll think I'm in trouble'. And he said 'You are'. And so I got expelled.

Jane's expulsion did not come out of the blue. She noted that teachers saw her as a troublemaker, and that she did not like the sense of inequality she felt and the lack of respect from teachers for students. Jane asserted that often teachers' only argument for getting students to do something was: 'I am the teacher, you are the student, do as you are told'.

After being expelled, Jane had to complete a ten week course for 'problem behaviour kids' who were expelled from school. Jane explained how it worked:

> If you pass, it is a ten week course, then you can come back [to school]. It is all about positive and negative thinking. The first thing you do in the morning is go "I can do the work". We were not allowed to have negative thoughts. And after a couple of weeks I got kicked out of that. They said that if I did not finish this course I could never go through another school.

Jane had no grounds to question the claim that no other school would enrol her. For two years she tried to complete Year 9 through various correspondence courses, with some assistance from her local community centre. Eventually, a social worker from the charity Barnardos started acting as case manager for Jane.

> I asked my case manager if she could look into [TAFE]. And she came up with this. She said 'you have a meeting on Friday', and I said 'rightio'. I came in, I had a meeting, they said 'do you want to come?' and I said 'yes'. So that's how I came the next week.

In 2000, Jane enrolled in the Year 10 program for adults at Sapphire Senior College. If all went well she hoped to complete Year 11 and 12 as well.

Michelle

Unlike Jane, Michelle chose to leave her school. Living with both parents, who were comfortably off, she had attended a high fee Christian school and described herself as 'middle class'. Michelle was used to standing up for herself and continued to be angry with her old school, for the lack of support they had provided in relation to her ill-health.

> Even though the school I was going to before was Christian, it was meant to be a caring environment but I didn't really find it so. [...] A lot of teachers at my old school kind of went "that's your problem, that's it". That wasn't good, it wasn't just a public school, we were paying high fees, you should get that kind of attention. But that didn't happen.

Michelle had Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. She finished Year 10 at her old school, as she said, more or less through 'distance education'. Not only did she feel the school did not support her, she claimed teachers' reluctance to understand and accept her illness further impaired her health:

> Because with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome stress affects it, as far as I can tell. The more stress you have the worse you feel, the more tired

> you feel. When you get teachers on your case who don't believe you and want doctor's certificates all the time it is not very nice.

Michelle not only condemned her previous school for the lack of support offered in relation to her health, but also for the lack of acceptance of individual differences. She felt that her previous school wanted students to be 'normal' and 'did not make an effort to understand anyone who was different'. Michelle explained what it was she did not like about school:

> That you have to be like everyone else, in a way. At some schools it is very institutionalised in the way they run and it is not very mature, and you can't change any of it. To me education is good because it enhances everything in your life, but I don't like being educated in those kind of places, where you have to compromise yourself to be educated.

This pressure to conform upset Michelle as much as the lack of support from the school for her health problems. Both contributed to her feeling the school lacked a supportive culture. Michelle enrolled in Ruby Senior College for Year 11 and 12, as she had heard it provided a more supportive environment.

'Effectiveness'

The school effectiveness paradigm has (at times unconsciously) informed suggestions on how to improve schooling for these marginalised students (e.g. MCEETYA, 2003; Paterson, 1995; Stainsby & Webster, 2000). The attraction of this paradigm lies in its assertion that schools can make a difference: i.e. among schools with similar student populations, some schools have higher student achievement and lower truancy than others. Emphasis is placed on identifying the features of these effective schools and effective teaching (e.g. Lezotte, 1989; Marsh, 1988). Based on this research, the effective teacher, as Fenstermacher & Soltis (1992) outline, uses a variety of instructional

techniques to increase 'time-on-task' and to match content to what is measured through assessment.

Slee (1998, p.107) explains that 'the logic is compelling in its simplicity', with lists of factors used by 'school improvers' to show teachers 'how to replicate effectiveness'. Despite its attractions, the school effectiveness paradigm is problematic, and, this paper argues, did not work for Jane and Michelle.

Within the school effectiveness approach, school failure and success tend to be measured in limited ways, mainly through school absenteeism measures and standardised tests of academic achievement, without recognising cultural bias (Angus, 1993), hard-to-quantify factors such as school climate (Leeman and Volman, 2001), or intrinsic and affective outcomes (Gibbs, 1999; Yates, 2001). Policies aimed at raising educational standards guided by such tests have been shown to be at odds with efforts to reduce marginalisation and exclusion in the UK (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2004).

The most explicit demonstration of educational exclusion is through expulsions. It is likely that there was more to Jane's expulsion than she mentioned. Nevertheless, the very possibility of expelling a student, for incidents which could be resolved in other ways, clearly demonstrates that in negative student-teacher relationships teachers ultimately have more power than students. Having teacher's authority propped up by a punitive school discipline has been recognised as an important contributor to negative teacher-student relationships and early school leaving in previous research (Batten and Russell, 1995; Holden and Dwyer, 1992; Smyth et al., 2000). Jane's feelings of not being listened to and not being respected by teachers would not be taken into account in school effectiveness measures, but were central to her schooling outcomes.

A further problem with the school effectiveness paradigm is that it tends to aim at assimilation rather than accepting, let alone celebrating, individual differences. A focus on formulating 'recipes for favourable achievements and choices' (Leeman and Volman, 2001, p. 369) ignores the complexities of practical schooling situations. Yates (2001)

demonstrates that school processes which produce general short-term achievement results can at the same time be to the detriment of individual students.

Schools such as Michelle's previous school perform well on standardised achievement measures, partly because they do not celebrate difference. Tamara, who had attended the same school as Michelle, explained:

> The teachers at my previous school, I felt they wanted to teach you just so they got good marks, but it wasn't for the students, they wanted it for themselves. They were really strict and they didn't really care about you. [..] At my old school they had to be strict to teach you.

By enforcing conformity to an academically competitive culture, and by refusing to cater for students with special needs (and implicitly if not explicitly encouraging them to leave), such schools are 'effective' only because they operate in an exclusionary manner.

School effectiveness research has been attractive for scholars arguing for more inclusion education, due to its 'swing in the pathological site of defect from the student to the teacher and school' (Slee, 1998, p. 107). In contrast, rather than blaming teachers this paper points to constructive possibilities offered by a different approach, based on the caring, human face of schooling. As Glenn Sargeant, a high school principal who set up a young mother's program in his school, argues:

> I believe a kid's got to be happy at school – all those other things come next. Very early in my career it struck me that we should be working with the kids, not against them.
> (quoted by Baird, 2004, p.37)

The school effectiveness approach to education too easily leads to a denial, rather than an expression, of teachers' and students' humanity (see Young, 1998). Garrison (1997,

p.xiii) puts it forcefully: 'Our bureaucratic world desperately needs reenchantment, and our technocratically controlled schools are no exception'.

Two young women – once more

Jane – and the role of teacher-student relationships

Jane had been led to believe no school would enrol her after she failed the behaviour management course. To her surprise, teachers at Sapphire Senior College made no problem about this:

> There was no sort of record where they looked through the school record to say that you're a problem child and you cannot come, or that you're a risk to the other students. It was just 'do you want to come, do you think you'll be able to do it, do you want to do it?'.

Jane found that once she had decided that she did 'want to do it', teaching staff tried to establish a positive relationship with her. The coordinating teacher of the Year 10 program decided to place her in the program for adults, rather than the one for teenagers because, Jane said she was told, 'she thought I'd get on better with the older than the younger students'.

In the interview, when asked to give an example of how the teachers at the College were different, Jane explained she had asked the Year 10 coordinator if she could change to another teacher for a particular subject because 'I know I'll get in trouble with her again'. Instead of blaming Jane for getting into trouble with a teacher, the coordinator not only accommodated Jane's wish but also told her Jane was doing her a favour by equalising the number of students in each class. This positive approach was in stark contrast to Jane's previous experiences of being perceived as a 'problem behaviour kid' at school.

At a more general level, Jane found the teachers at the College to be more 'laid back' and helpful:

> With this school you have a lot of teachers you can actually go to. Even ones that you don't even know, you can go up to them and say 'excuse me miss I have a problem can you please help me'.

The human dimension of schooling is perhaps nowhere more clearly present than in the relationships that exist between teachers and students in a school. Jane's experiences demonstrate the difference that can be made through positive teacher-student relationships. Jane was not the only student to express this – in both Senior Colleges the quality of these relationships were central to students' experiences.

Common words used by students in both Senior Colleges to describe the teachers (in interviews and in an open question on the survey) included: kind, friendly, easy going, laid back, and down to earth. For students, the friendly attitude of teachers was not a minor benefit but made a genuine difference to their education. As Noddings (2003, p.244) argues, 'it matters to students whether or not they like and are liked by their teachers'.

Moreover, students suggested that teachers were helpful, supportive and understanding. Many students referred to teachers 'going out of their way' to help students, making time even during their lunch break. Perhaps even more than the friendly disposition of teachers, their supportiveness and understanding seemed to be of central importance in helping students to learn and making schooling at the Senior Colleges a positive experience. The benefit was mutual, with teachers from both Senior Colleges stating that they themselves enjoyed the good rapport and positive relationships between staff and students.

The quality of teacher-student relationships is tested most clearly in relation to discipline issues. This was one of the major issues on which the Senior Colleges differed from mainstream schools, as Mr Iglesias (Sapphire Senior College) explained:

> There are a lot less restrictive rules of the type that you would find in your usual school. I guess that is the main reason that many students are attracted here – the fact that it doesn't operate the way a regular school does in terms of the relationship that is formed between the staff and the students. The academic expectations are just as high as in a regular school, but there isn't all the conflict that is caused by school uniform and things like that, which happens at regular schools.

The reduction in 'restrictive rules' assisted in reducing the need for students to fit in with a rigid image of the 'good student' (Fine, 1991; HRSCEET, 1996; McLaren, 1994) which had led to suspensions or expulsion by previous schools for Senior College students such as Jane. Moreover, rules that were in place were implemented in what students perceived as a fair and reasonable manner.

All in all, the disciplinary approaches at the Senior Colleges were evidence of a caring attitude. Disciplinary regulations were not absent, but the punitive stand on discipline critiqued in previous research (Batten and Russell, 1995; Dwyer et al., 1998; Reid, 1986; Smyth et al., 2000) was replaced by a more supportive approach. Mr Kwong (Sapphire Senior College) put it this way:

> I think we find that there is much more intervention here to get the student through rather than punishing for breaking the rules. There is far more consideration given to students.

As suggested by Ms Correa (Sapphire Senior College), 'that little bit of flexibility' made a big difference. This flexibility allowed teachers to treat students as unique persons and

to exercise emotional sympathy, rather than having to implement a set of technical guidelines for effective discipline.

Students also referred to a sense of mutual respect, which contributed to feeling treated as equals and adults. Reciprocity was seen as central by both students and staff. For example, Mr Kwong explained that teacher authority was 'only earned through a mutual respect between students and staff'.

These experiences reinforce Noddings' (2003) argument that students need to be treated as persons by teachers. Such treatment of students enables a recognition and expression, rather than a denial, of their humanity.

Michelle – and the role of the whole-school culture

Michelle's illness (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) had been a major reason for leaving her previous school and she talked at length about the differences in the approach taken by her old school and Ruby Senior College. The Senior College arranged a part-time timetable for her so that 'I don't have that much of a heavy work load in any one year'. Teachers also provided her with work to do at home when she was too ill to come in, and when she missed classes: 'they are a lot more helpful than at my old school, they give me all the sheets and notes that I need'. Her year adviser and the school counsellor had also helped Michelle with special exam provisions.

These positive contributions, combined with the absence of the negative pressures of teachers and peers at her previous school not believing she was really ill, meant that Michelle could not only cope better with school but also felt less ill because 'this place doesn't stress me as much'.

Besides specific assistance in relation to her illness, Michelle suggested the more caring culture of Ruby Senior College accepted everyone as they were, so that 'nobody is out of

place, everyone is their own person'. If the Senior College had not existed, Michelle said:

> I probably would have left school, totally. Before I knew about this school I just said 'school is not for me, it is too institutionalised'.

Besides teacher-student relationships, the culture across a school also affects students' well-being, and forms a second major component of the human dimension of schooling. The importance of this whole-school component is especially clear in Michelle's experiences, but was also shared by other students.

Students expressed a sense of not only individual teachers but the whole Senior College being supportive and caring. For Jenny (Sapphire Senior College) one of the most important aspects of school-wide support was that all students were given the support they needed and nobody was 'shoved in the corner'. In agreement with Jenny, Susan was happy that at Sapphire Senior College there were 'no outcasts'.

Some students referred specifically to their experience of school support for 'individual student problems or difficulties' [RSC157 female teenager]. Within the research literature, flexibility is highlighted as the most important aspect of a school organisation that is supportive of the needs of young people (Batten and Russell, 1995; Dwyer et al., 1998). Mr Iglesias explained it came down to recognising students' out-of-school lives:

> We are a lot more flexible, and people can carry on the rest of their lives. They don't have to leave that behind in order to attend here.

Andrew (Sapphire Senior College) confirmed this, suggesting that many students at Sapphire Senior College 'have outside problems and work commitments' and the Senior College 'respects what they are doing' by adjusting their timetable to fit in with their lives.

Overall, the culture of both Senior Colleges embraced the idea that 'nothing is out of the question [..] every possibility is a reality' (Ms Santos, Ruby Senior College) in order to support students' needs. Teachers from both Colleges perceived teaching as a 'caring profession'. They suggested the Senior College approach was to treat students as individuals so that teachers could get to know students well and students did not feel, as Ms O'Brien put it, that they were 'just a number' (Sapphire Senior College).

A whole school approach to creating a positive atmosphere was reflected in student comments that they found the Senior College environment or atmosphere to be 'friendly' and 'relaxed'. For example James (Sapphire Senior College) said there was 'a good vibe to the place'. This positive atmosphere helped to create a sense of community, where students felt 'more comfortable' [SSC119 female teenager].

At Ruby Senior College, Mr Borg said that the College was not 'as closed and as cold' as many schools and according to Ms Di Mauro, teachers made an effort 'to warm [students] into the school and they can feel that sense of community'. The positive atmosphere seemed to be the culmination of positive experiences in relation to all the other aspects of both Senior Colleges.

Of course, a whole-school culture depends on the contributions made by individual teachers, while the work of individual teachers is also supported by a positive whole-school culture. These two aspects reinforce each other, and for Jane and Michelle, as well as their peers, both individual teachers and a whole-school approach made a difference to their experiences.

The whole-school culture in the Senior Colleges was partly the result of staff questioning the usual school practices that had not worked for many of their students, and replacing them with practices that served the interest of the students rather than the school. Garrison's observation that caring teachers 'sometimes choose to break rules rather than students' (1997, p. xvii) is relevant here. Ms Ellis (Ruby Senior College) was pleasantly surprised on starting work at Ruby Senior College to find that when 'there is a specific

need in the school then the automatic response is to see what you could put in place to deal with that'.

The human face of schooling

Teaching is a 'relational practice', as Noddings (2003) so clearly argues. Establishing relations of care and trust are necessary for teachers, in order to assist in developing their students as whole persons, as a foundation for transmitting knowledge, and as an end in itself (Noddings, 2003, p.250). As Hargreaves (1997) explains, good teaching is not just about technical competence, but also involves emotion. Going a step further, Gibbs (1999) argues that the demands accompanying the drive for improved school effectiveness, such as mandatory record-keeping and quality assurance audits, actually form hindrances to good teaching. With Hargreaves (1997, p. 108), this paper also worries that 'too often educational reform elevates cognition above care as a priority for improvement'.

This paper aims to contribute to redirecting our gaze towards the human dimension of schooling and care as a priority for inclusive schooling practices. What Slee argues about disablement, may also be used to explain marginalisation:

> … as cultural politics and not as a technical problem of product delivery. Such an argument challenges the normalizing project of the 'effective school'. (Slee, 1998, p. 101)

Successful teaching and learning for Jane, Michelle, and their peers, relied on a recognition in the Senior Colleges of the human dimension of schooling – both in the relationship of individual teachers with students and in the culture of the school as a whole – rather than on 'effective teaching' techniques.

In other words, abandoning the school effectiveness approach does not mean giving up on exploring better, more inclusive, schooling practices for marginalised students. It means changing the lens we look through while engaging in this endeavour.

The findings presented here provide evidence for 'practice-with-hope' (Young, 1997), as they point to possibilities for teachers and schools to make a difference. The caring dimensions of the Senior College environment were crucial to the inclusion of the students. Thus, any specific teacher and schooling practices outlined above should not be used as yet another recipe for teachers to use, simply replacing the lists devised by school effectiveness researchers. Rather, this paper aims to contribute to a re-orientation, which recognises teaching as a human and caring vocation. Such a recognition is likely to benefit all students, marginalised or not.

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