How Young People see School:
This is no Ship of Fools

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In the elegant prose of *Madness and Civilization* (Histoire de la Folie), Michel Foucault (1967) explores with searing insight the process by which society has constructed, refined and applied the mechanisms of segregation and confinement for those considered unworthy of the usual rights of social cohabitation and intercourse.

Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and 'deranged minds' would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well. With an altogether new meaning and in a very different culture, the forms would remain—essentially that major form of rigorous division which is social exclusion but spiritual reintegration (Foucault 1967, p. 7).

So deep have been the prejudices against various groups, that they have been forcibly evicted from the tenancy in the communities that one would have assumed their birthrights guaranteed them. The spectre of leprosy diminished, the leprosariums remained as monuments to social control. Their vigil became more functional as new communities were rounded up and housed therein—the insane, the 'morally and mentally defective', and the criminal. The situation of these institutions in the midst of 'normal' society was as worrisome in the Fifteenth Century as it has been in the Twentieth Century. This anxiety is manifest in the more lateral 'solutions' explored.

The popular notion of the 'ship of fools' applied variously, as it has been to all and sundry: political parties, state and federal cabinets, and more imaginatively to departments within tertiary education institutions, has particularly sobering origins in Renaissance history. To expunge or abort madness from their communities, local authorities commissioned merchant seamen to accept consignment of a human cargo of the insane and deliver them to wherever they could be traded, sold or ejected. A difficult transaction for even the most entrepreneurial of international traders to expedite, what happened to these tragic cargoes is not carefully chronicled in historical records. The concern was simply with identifying and removing a group that manifest a perceived threat to society. Put simply, it was a political act. The problem was far too difficult, attitudes far too entrenched; let us simply remove that problem by a sleight of hand.
If space permitted we could explore this history further in order to demonstrate that while treatments have changed over time, the intent has, in some quarters, fundamentally endured. A committee commissioned by then Director of Education, Frank Tate, to explore the issue of intellectual disability is indicative:

The army of unskilled vagrants, habitual inebriates, criminals and lunatics is largely recruited from the ranks of the mentally defective . . . by discovering these social criminals before they have committed crime, society can take measures to prevent them ever committing it by means of permanent custodial care (Victorian Public Records Office 1911, pp. 1-2).

According to Lewis (1987) the 'invention of measurable intelligence' and the expansion of the special education industry in Victoria owes more to the traditions of social cleansing and control Foucault describes, than it does to the more popular discourse of 'benevolent humanitarianism'. Indeed, the powerful and pervasive belief that mental defectiveness signified a predisposition to criminality and moral depravity, made it imperative that society protect itself by means of diagnosis and segregation of these imminently dangerous people.

This process of diagnosis and segregation had two immediate effects. It necessitated the creation and continual refinements of the instruments of diagnosis, not that they have ever been subjected to the cold light of public scrutiny. Moreover it created a need for the creation of destinations for the diagnosed. The industry was thus forged. Like all other such processes, the function begat the need for experts to police the diagnosis and custodial care programs. Ultimately the bureaucracies grew. This was capped off by the necessary spawning of their linguistic legitimation.

This last facet is most pressing in the context of this discussion. While the imperatives for the types of actions we are describing here ran according to one agenda, public explanations were always depicted within a significantly different discourse. The depoliticisation of language to divert from or conceal bureaucratic or political intentions has been extensively explored elsewhere (Barthes 1972, p. 143; Foucault 1967; Cohen 1985). The point of this discussion then is to place a recent research project I conducted with young people in Melbourne schools within a broader context of education and social policy.

We need, as Kapferer (1987) has observed, to be vigilant against the dragooning of education, delinquency prevention programs and other areas of youth policy development into concealed imperatives for the containment of young people contrary to their needs and valuable educational and social outcomes. This project was designed to consider the needs of young people, to examine how schools might better meet these needs and evaluate an off-site model of educational provision to 'at risk' students.

A great deal of research interest has focussed upon the role of academic failure and differential and stratifying school institutional processes in the production of a marginal and resistant student population (Polk 1984; Knight 1985; Slee 1988). That these people are increasingly being directed towards a range of unsatisfactory choices, including juvenile crime, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and prostitution has been the subject of serious and vicarious academic and media attention. A popular response to the perceived problems of these young people has been the proliferation of alternative settings and programs to cater for their 'special needs'. Mongon (1988) is amongst local and international researchers who have demonstrated the inherent problems of this symptomatic or reflexive response. Ultimately the question of the goal of increased post-compulsory school participation needs to be confronted. Is there an educational point? Will it contribute to better educational and social outcomes for all young people? Or is it a variation on the theme of containment thought entertainment and restricted range of alternatives?
Schools cannot be the 'ship of fools'. To entertain, to contain without addressing the critical issues of articulation between education, training, higher education and the labour market; or confronting the needs of homeless youth will not suffice. It would merely contribute to the growing numbers of resistant, alienated and disenfranchised youth. What this project unambiguously demonstrates is the capacity of young people to distinguish between rhetoric and reality and to articulate an agenda of needs.

How Young People See School

A group of thirteen to fifteen-year-old students from Collingwood Education Centre, Fitzroy Secondary College and Richmond Secondary College was approached. The brief for the 'Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service' project was to:

- identify the educational needs of young people; and
- evaluate their existing education program.

The focus here is on the first part of that commission.

Project design

Approaches were made to the aforementioned schools as these were all served by the agency sponsoring the project. At Collingwood Education Centre (CEC) Michael Metcalfe's Year 11 Social Studies class volunteered to design, implement and evaluate a survey of Year 7-10 students randomly selected from the three schools. They were assisted by Year 11 students from Fitzroy Secondary College (FSC).

The project was to become a part of those students' Year 11 curriculum, their work evaluated and contributing to their assessment. It is essential that such work be legitimised through recognition as accredited assessment tasks.

Preliminary discussions determined that the target population for the research would comprise ten students from each of level 7, 8, 9 and 10 from each of the following schools: CEC, FSC and Richmond Secondary College (RSC). So forty students participated from each school with the total sample population being 120 students.

This sampling was designed to gauge the levels at which issues emerged or became more critical for students. It also allowed for variance between the selected inner urban schools. Teachers randomly selected the students; however, there was an attempt to make the samples equal in terms of gender representation.

Student researchers

The students from CEC and FSC engaged in the research teams were required to participate in two training days at the Melbourne College of Advanced Education. The setting provided the opportunity for students to work within and observe a tertiary education institution. The participation of lecturers from Melbourne University, Melbourne College of Advanced Education and the Ballarat College of Education extended this tertiary orientation for the students. Implicit was a commitment to the principle that learning is not unique to the formal classroom.

Students were assured that their findings would be useful. The students would present their results to the Victorian State Board of Education to assist them in their deliberations which would influence the shaping of the Years 7-10 curriculum.
The students were led through a range of activities to develop their research skills and commenced the task of identifying the students' perceptions of their educational needs. The range of issues included the following: work skills orientation and education; teaching methods and social development; human relations and social development; school governance; gender and multicultural issues; and school amenities.

The students themselves determined the questions for the survey. This process was valuable as it enabled the students to interpret their own experience and articulate their understandings in a public forum and to test their understandings against the experiences of their peers. Students owned the research process and results.

The students' perceptions of school—what the data showed

Summary of findings:

- A comprehensive curriculum was offered to Years 7-10 students in the sample schools. Mathematics and English were deemed the most important components of the schools' academic fare. Curriculum development is required in:
  - Work Education
  - Computer Studies
  - Technology Studies
  - Human Relationships/Personal Development.
- Increasing student commitment to the study of science has not filtered down to school level according to this sample. There was a slippage of perceived importance amongst the older students.
- The majority of the respondents aspire to the completion of Year 12 studies. This contrasts with national evidence on participation rates.
- Compulsory attendance should be increased to sixteen years of age.
- A significant level of anxiety was recorded about leaving school and vocational destinations—or otherwise.
- Higher education was not considered to be an option that was realistically available to most of the cohort.
- Students expressed concern that links between the labour market and school programs were not made explicit.
- Factors contributing to 'unhappiness' at school may possibly be ameliorated without involving fundamental changes to school life and its administration.
- Teaching methodology represents a major focus for student dissatisfaction. A point highlighted in the QERC Report (1985, p. 42).
- Rule-making and application is seen to be remote from the students. A greater say in the determination of school rules was seen to be important.
- Students expressed a need for the recognition and extension of their rights.
- Room exists for the improvement of student/teacher relationships.
- Though the chart, on the face of it, reported that girls get as good a deal from schools as boys, female respondents were more inclined to express the need for an extension of their rights and the development of more participatory structures in the school.
- School climate, educational delivery and achievement and curriculum content would all improve through greater student participation in decision-making. This opportunity would increase the commitment of 'troublesome' students.
Young People on the Outside?

The above findings were supplemented by discussion with young people at the Fitzroy Community Youth Centre who had prematurely left school.

Among the issues which emerged which contributed to the marginalisation and school-leaving of these people were the following:

- Access to information about financial assistance for impoverished students is scant within schools.
- When such assistance is arranged, it is insufficient to meet the requirements of families seeking to extend their children's education.
- Institutional inflexibility leads inexorably to the exclusion of many young people.
- Students who have to assume home duties for periods of time, receive little assistance in re-entering school life. Students who need to work part-time have similar difficulty in making part-time arrangements with schools.
- Discipline procedures induce dossiers, labels and sanctions which are segregative and non-redemptive.
- Teaching methodologies were identified as inflexible and the teachers as remote. The young people believed that teachers often misunderstood the problems students experienced. Whether this is accurate or not is irrelevant if the perception is established.
- Curriculum seemed irrelevant and chances of it leading to work slim.
- Families felt unwelcomed by the school or were reticent to approach the school because they felt 'deficient' or inadequate.
- Crisis support in schools is severely limited and inadequate.
- Attempts at remedial education are frequently humiliating.
- Schools do not, through their curricula, establish a climate of acceptance of students in different or difficult circumstances. Social ostracism leads to many feeling little option but to leave school.

The Impact of the Research

One of the most exciting aspects of the project was the presentation of the report by the students to the State Board of Education, senior personnel from the Ministry of Education, and the Catholic Education Office and to academics and students from the Student Participation Working Party at the Rialto building in Melbourne.

Clearly the meeting was of mutual benefit. The research team engaged in public discussion of their work had to articulate and defend their findings. Moreover, they tabled recommendations for school improvement. Students were accountable for their work, demonstrating in a most productive manner the skills and knowledge that they had gathered on the way.

An invitation extended to students to participate further in the State Board of Education's 'Barriers to Participation Project' was indicative of the impact of the research upon those who attended. The monitoring processes that were built into the project also served to endorse the beneficial nature of the project. Tertiary students from Melbourne College of Advanced Education produced a film from the project. More importantly, others were involved in observing the student researchers and interviewing them to evaluate the quality of the learning experience. Both the film and the evaluation reports provided a powerful confirmation of the learning process and the utility of the work undertaken.

A strong theme throughout the work lies in its concurrence with reports such as QERC 1985; Making The Future (Middleton et al. 1986); In The National Interest (Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987) and Learning Initiatives To Include All
Students In The Regular Classroom (Slee, in press) which move the emphasis from compensatory models of educational delivery to the development of non-stratifying comprehensive curricula for all students. Students invite schools to continue to embrace them in participatory decision-making structures of curricula development and school governance. Holdsworth (1988) has demonstrated the ability of students to assume such a role. They argue for a broadening of curriculum and of assessment practices so as to achieve greater congruence with the world that awaits them. To support such development they seek the movement of support into the schools rather than away from the classroom, and the 'freeing up' of institutional arrangements to enable participation on 'part-time contracts'.

Alternative Settings to Cater for the 'Special Needs' of 'At Risk' Students

A number of alternative centres have emerged to cater for the 'special needs' of 'at risk' students. There are two major concerns emanating from the application of labels such as 'special needs' and 'at risk' students. Firstly, the definition of categories for such differential treatment is highly subjective, often impoverished by a lack of contextual analysis or understanding.

Secondly, the application of such labels, and the ensuing treatment of students has been convincingly demonstrated to assume the yoke of a self-fulfilling prophesy (Lemert 1967; Schur 1971 and 1973; Pink 1982).

Though based upon good intentions, the proliferation of 'off-site' solutions to disruption in schools represents an example of this labelling process. Two teaching units were established in Victoria. Those responsible were remiss in reflecting international evaluations of, and consequent anxieties about similar centres. Her Majesty's Inspectorate tabled its unfavourable review of off-site centres in 1978. That report entitled Behavioural Units (Her Majesty's Inspectorate 1978) raised a number of disturbing issues which included: the problem of labelling and its consequences on educational outcomes; restricted curriculum offerings to the students; reintegration processes were neither well-defined or successful for the majority of referrals; referral processes were inconsistent between schools; disproportionate referral of working class and minority group children; parents and students often not clear on the reasons for referral or their educational prognosis; and referral of students had no appreciable positive effect on the referring school in terms of diminishing suspensions, incidence of corporal punishment, or declining referrals.

While authorities in Hartford, Connecticut found that only 7 per cent of students referred to units found their way back to their regular classroom (Hartford Public Schools 1975), Daines records that the behaviour warranting the referral re-emerged in more than 60 per cent of the students who managed to be reintegrated (Daines 1981). This becomes particularly significant when considering the Inner London Education Authority's report that only 30 per cent of those referred to off-site centres are successfully reintegrated (ILEA 1985). No such evaluation of longitudinal data has been conducted in Australia. Reports remain anecdotal and descriptive.

Further disquiet is prompted by Galloway (1980) who notes that:

...the increasing referral rate reflects a variation on Parkinson's Law: the number of problem children referred to psychologists for special education has increased in direct proportion to the availability of resources.

The rapid expansion of off-site units in Britain to offer over 7000 places for students by 1984 (Mongon 1988, p. 190) is testimony to the maxim of generating one's institutional indispensability. Since 1980, Victoria has played host to a further five units with numerous others coming under different descriptions. This and continuing
calls for further expansion have occurred since the release of integration policy which affirms the Education Ministry's commitment to desegregation.

As the students have articulated in this research project, their needs are not essentially 'special' and therefore in need of individual remediation. All young people have needs. Pearl et al. (1978) summarises these needs for us:

- Recognition and extension of COMPETENCE
- BELONGING
- Students' work needs to demonstrate USEFULNESS, both to themselves and the community in which they live
- HOPE for the future.

That the traditional, narrow, stratified academic curricula is not accommodating these needs for identifiable groups of young people has been well documented in a succession of research reports and government documents (QERC 1985; Commonwealth Schools Commission 1987 and DEET 1987) are indicative. The failure of schools in developing curricula and organisational flexibility to include all students was identified by the National Inquiry into Homeless Children (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1989, pp. 271-2).

The challenge then is for education authorities and their schools to develop curricula which address the needs of all students rather than developing processes which transport children into streams which lead them further away from the possibility of successful educational outcomes. We seem to have returned to our introduction: the proliferation of metaphorical 'ships of fools' is unacceptable from educational and social justice standpoints. Similarly we need, as the students are exhorting us, to address what it is we are going to do with the post-compulsory curricula to ensure that the drive for retention is not an imperative for social containment.

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