Imagination for re-engagement from the margins of education

Dr Derek Bland

Faculty of Education

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane

Dr Derek Bland

School of Learning and Professional Studies

Queensland University of Technology

Victoria Park Road

Queensland 4059

Australia

Email: d.bland@qut.edu.au

Phone: (07) 3138 3469

Fax: (07) 3138 3987

Abstract

For marginalised secondary school students, mainstream education may no longer appear to be an inviting place. While proposed solutions to problems of disengagement and marginalisation appear to concentrate on finding ways to coerce students back to mainstream education through, for example, 'learning or earning' legislation, this article suggests that more effective solutions may be found by engaging with the students in the margins that they occupy.. Following discussion of key influences on student disengagement and a theory of imaginations, a 'students as researchers' (SaR) model of working with young people is discussed to demonstrate that, through the scaffolded application of active imagination, it is possible for the students to identify their own connections to the mainstream. The SaR model is illustrated through reference to groups of disaffected high school students who participated in an action research project to investigate apparent low aspiration for tertiary education among their peers at schools serving a low-income communities in Queensland, Australia.

Keywords

Imagination in education;Marginalised students; Educational engagement; Students as researchers

Many labels are applied by teachers and academics to secondary school students who, for various reasons, inhabit the margins of formal education (Graham 2007). They are considered to be 'at-risk', 'disengaged', 'disaffected', 'disadvantaged, and 'marginalised' to name a few of the terms applied to those who view schooling from an outsider position. Perhaps this variety of labels indicates a certain difficulty in identifying solutions to the problems associated with educational marginalisation. While most proposed solutions to students' disengagement appear to concentrate on finding ways to coerce students back to mainstream education, this article suggests that more effective answers may be found through engaging with the students in the margins that they occupy. Recent education reforms in Australia that require students to be 'learning or earning' (i.e., to attend school until Year 12 if they are not already in employment or job training) may not be appropriate to those already disengaged and hostile to mainstream institutions. Voices from the margins may, instead, inform more imaginative means to build bridges to engagement. This article suggests that, through the scaffolded application of active imagination via a 'students-as-researchers' model, it is possible for such students to identify their own connections to the mainstream. Where marginalised students can see for themselves that formal education offers a meaningful purpose, they may choose it freely as an appropriate option.

The aim of this article is not to romanticise marginalisation, nor to ignore its potentially damaging outcomes for students, but to suggest that once students have moved into the margins, the mainstream is no longer an inviting place and other means must be found of working with them towards educational empowerment. This article firstly examines the attraction of self-marginalisation for disaffected students. Secondly, it questions the relevance of current government policies aimed at reversing educational disengagement and the discourse surrounding marginalised students. Thirdly, the example of a recent participatory action research project involving university researchers and students from a number of secondary schools in Queensland is discussed to illustrate the value of dialogue "between the margins and the mainstream" (Greene 1991, p. 38). Despite educational marginalisation, the young people involved in the project appeared to maintain a belief in education as the way forward to a more positive future. Building on this latent hope, many project participants found for themselves a purpose for re-connecting with the mainstream and considering tertiary education as a viable and appealing post-school option. Finally, the article focuses on the key role of imagination in assisting the project participants to revive their

engagement with education. The data for the latter parts of this article were developed from focus groups and interviews with participants in the action research project through the author's doctoral research and from the participants' own project presentations.

Choosing not to learn

While schooling in Australia provides for the educational needs of the majority of students, recent Australian research found that the most educationally disadvantaged students are condemned to mediocrity by exposure to the least stimulating and relevant material (Neville 2005; Zyngier 2003). Such students, generally from low socio-economic and Indigenous backgrounds, frequently feel devalued by their schools while the pathways generally available to them were also less valued (Australian Centre for Equity through Education & the Australian Youth Research Centre 2001). These students may also "receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction" (Levin 2000, p. 164), This echoes an earlier but much cited US report (Haberman 1991) highlighting the dulling routines predominant in schools serving educationally disadvantaged communities. In such learning environments, young people are denied any real sense of agency and the opportunity to change their world (McInerney 2006). The educational option of choice for many secondary school students unable to find relevance in mainstream schooling may be, therefore, disengagement and self-marginalisation.

When schooling becomes an alienating and irrelevant experience, students "see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it" (Smyth & Hattam 2001, p. 403), withdraw their labour (McInerney 2006) and actively exercise "their right to resist, which means they are making choices to 'not learn'" (Smyth 2006, p. 282). Attitudes may then harden into hostility towards the institution of schooling (Smyth 2006) which maintains an authority and privilege to which they have no access (Connell 1993), attending only because of legal requirements. Margins, then, can be seen as a place for suppressed feelings and intuitions (Donoghue 1983, in Greene 1991, p. 27) and can appear attractive to at-risk students whose school cultures marginalise them or allow them to drop out through official practices such as academic requirements for progression. Within the cultures of both schools and margins, relations of power construct the social and spatial boundaries of place, defining who may belong and who may be excluded (Angwin, Blackmore & Shacklock 2001).

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In his classic study of self-marginalised students in Britain, Willis (1977) argued that the resistance to school displayed by "the lads'" (a self-titled sub-culture of working-class schoolboys) was associated with affirmation of their working-class culture. Similarly, in the US, Traber (2001) tracked the self-marginalisation of groups of disenfranchised US youth, aligning themselves with the punk movement that had itself appropriated the margins of society. In doing so, these young people were constructing an oppositional identity perceived as undesirable by the conservative mainstream, worn as a "badge of honour" (Traber 2001, p. 47). Through this identity, these youth consciously rejected the privileges of the dominant culture. Separation through sub-cultures can empower a "collective confidence" and often serves as a "primary function in youth cultures formed by disaffiliated adolescents" (Kearney 1998, p. 152). Kearney provided the example of the "riot grrrl" sub-culture, formed in the early 1990's in both the US and the UK, comprising adolescent females, some of who found the group to be a safe haven from misogyny and homophobia.

One response of governments, in Australia and elsewhere, to dealing with the educational and social consequences of educational marginalisation has been to enforce a regime of attendance in an approved activity, citing research demonstrating improved life choices for students who complete Year 12. The former Australian Minister for Education, for example, recently announced that anyone under the age of 20 without a year 12 or equivalent qualification must be in education or training in order to receive the government's youth allowance payments (Gillard 2009). The UK Department for Education and Skills has introduced similar legislation requiring young people to stay in school, training or workplace training until the age of 18 (BBC 2007). Effectively raising the school leaving age, similar recent legislation in Queensland, Australia, requires young people to be "learning or earning" for two years after they complete compulsory schooling (i.e., Year 10) or until they turn 17 years of age or until they complete an approved qualification (Education Queensland 2007). Notwithstanding the democratic consultative processes that informed this legislation and the community-centred support made available (Singh & Sawyer, 2008), the emphasis on surveillance and the potential for over-policing marginalised young people could lead to increased disempowerment rather than the utopian ideal envisioned by Singh and Sawyer. This legislation increases the policing and surveillance of young people through 'Student Accounts', 'Learner Unique Identifier' numbers, and the establishment of overseeing committees. From the collected data, "the Department will be able to identify young people who are *not engaged in learning*" (Education Queensland 2007; emphasis added).

'Engagement' in this sense is defined by student compliance, requiring little engagement in learning or reflection on their own learning (Vibert & Shields 2003). Whether the resulting engagement will offer genuine and broad-ranging post-school options to disaffected students remains to be seen. In an investigation of alternative education provision in a disadvantaged area of a major Queensland city, Connor (2006) found that students from that community were offered limited choice through a focus on vocational education and training (VET). While this may suit some marginalised students, a one-size-fits-all approach closes off other options and, as stated by Zyngier (2003), "a practical hands-on curriculum is not necessarily an engaging curriculum" (p. 43). Connor called for an education that builds connections to a range of post-compulsory learning. Recent UK research also concluded that education policy should encourage marginalised young people to aspire towards post-compulsory education (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2000, para. 24).

Deficits and labels

'Demonising discourses' (McInerney 2006, p. 12) portray marginalised students as a danger to the well-behaved majority, deviant, and 'contaminating' the school culture (Zyngier 2006, p. 4). These practices extend deficit notions, framing some students as undeserving of attention. They are then at risk of becoming "morally excluded" (Opotow, Gerson & Woodside 2005, p. 305), undeserving of fair treatment, and "eligible for deprivation, exploitation, and other harms that might be ignored or condoned as normal, inevitable, and deserved". Such deficit concepts reinforce one of the most pervasive assumptions surrounding students who have disengaged from school, namely that the cause rests with the student (Smyth & Hattam 2001). Variations of deficit reasoning imply that the disengaging student has anti-social tendencies, has an unsupportive family, comes from an undesirable community or is influenced by an anti-academic peer group. While some of these factors may be true of some students and environments some of the time, these students are not necessarily delinquent nor lacking in ability, but find the middle class institution of schooling to be "completely banal, meaningless and without purpose, except as a reasonably pleasant place in which to meet and socialize with one's friends" (Smyth 2006, p. 286). The generalisation of deficit interpretations to all disengaged students' unwelcome behaviour avoids questioning the

relevance of official knowledge (Apple 1996) for non-mainstream students and how cultural and structural biases may exist in schools to entrench processes of social reproduction and disadvantage (Meadmore 1999).

Closely allied to deficit perspectives is the problem of 'labelling' and the possibility that students may become known through the deficit labels applied to them that may then become self-fulfilling prophecies (Graham 2007; McInerney & McInerney 2006). Labels are stigmatising and constitutive; that is, the person is seen by others through the distorting lens of that label, taking blame away from the curriculum or the education system and placing it on the child. Moreover, teachers may unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of social inequity through discriminatory practices, such as low expectations of some students due to the labels that they have accepted as factual descriptors. Students may also contribute to their own stigmatisation: as students progress to secondary school age, they start to believe that their abilities are fixed. Paradoxically, they may use avoidance techniques such as inappropriate classroom behaviour to "avoid being labelled 'dumb'" (McInerney & McInerney 2006, p. 239).

School-level strategies to deal with inappropriate behaviour, such as time-out rooms and Responsible Thinking Centres (RTCs), have their place in assisting teachers to deal with immediate behaviour problems in classrooms but may well be used to avoid addressing questions of appropriate pedagogy, system, oppression, powerlessness and discrimination. Further, such remedies, though well-intentioned, mostly rely on transforming or reforming the student to stay in or fit back into the mainstream (Smyth & Down 2004) through compliance with its culture and curriculum. As stated by Holdsworth (2004), however, we know "through many evaluations, that 'alternatives' that focus on 'fixing' behaviour or learning problems through withdrawing students from the 'mainstream' and then seek to return those students to the original situation, do not work" (p.7), apart from providing temporary relief, and may, in fact, serve "to hide severe problems from view".

Imagination in the margins

Once students have found a place in the margins of formal schooling there may be little incentive to engage in mainstream education. Rather than attempting to coerce them back to the mainstream through surveillance and legislation, then, perhaps we need to go where they are, on the margins of formal schooling.

The margins of education may indeed be places of great creativity. Science writer, Stephen Jay Gould, extolled margins as spaces of creative change in which "the first fruits and inklings of novel insights and radical revisions" can appear (2001, p. 92), while Greene argued that the margins should be made "visible and accessible" (1991, p. 38) and that dialogue should be encouraged between the margins and the mainstream. Greene proposed new collaborations among teachers and students in "larger and larger meeting places in schools [to] undertake common searches for their place and significance in history to which they too belong and which they invent and interpret as they live" (1991, p. 38).

A students-as-researchers (SaR) approach is one way in which Greene's vision can be enacted, offering ways for young people to engage imaginatively with issues that are of direct concern to their own lives. The SaR experience, in which students begin to understand the ways that unseen forces act on their lives, allows students to "imagine new possibilities for themselves" (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1998, p. 230). SaR also cultivates empathy with others, providing opportunities for imagination to be released in a way that posits new possibilities (Kincheloe & Steinberg 1998).

The SaR project on which this article is based is a university and schools' partnership that has been operating for some years in Queensland, targeting students in schools with historically low progression to tertiary education. Using a participatory action research approach, the major focus of the project is to investigate local issues influencing tertiary education awareness and aspiration. The project is grounded in social justice principles and a belief that higher education should be an option for all students, regardless of background or culture (Bland 2006). The process employed by the project provides a dialogic space that allows and encourages participants to "ask 'why' and to 'think differently'" (Noone & Cartwright 2005, p. 4). This engagement of the students' imaginations can re-connect them with the possibilities that formal education can offer, helping them to deal with the requirements and constraints of school education, while imagining "that things could be otherwise" (Noone & Cartwright 2005, p. 2).

Crucially, the student researchers are not coerced into participation in the project and they have the choice to withdraw at any stage. In the years that the project has operated, however, there has been little drop-out other than through necessity (e.g., students moving away) or where teachers have attempted to overly control or subvert the students' plans.

Project activities generally commence near the beginning of the school year with a workshop at the university campus and continue throughout the year at each school. Within the project's structure, there are many opportunities for imaginative processes to emerge as the students come to realise that their involvement in the project is more than a classroom exercise, that they are being taken seriously, and that the possibility exists for them to make a real and positive impact on their educational environment. The processes of participatory action research fit well with the ability to invent new futures based on first-hand experience of the problems that occur for young people who are do not feel accommodated by mainstream schooling. This kind of "social imagination" (Greene 1995) can help challenge education systems to "imagine a world that is not yet imagined" (Fine 1994, p. 30). This is not to say that the vain imaginings of disaffected youth have implicit merit. Indeed, Maxcy (1991) differentiated between imagination that is simply daydreams (reverie, déjà vu, or remembrance) and imagination that is "inspirational, creative, innovative, and problem-solving in nature" (p. 112). It is this second model that can become "critically pragmatic imagination" (p. 126) through being reflexive and purposeful and that can lead to genuine empowerment, through which the students gain more agency over their own life choices.

The principles of empowerment and emancipation that underscore the SaR project are grounded in critical theory which is informed by a "strong ethical concern for the individual" and a longing for a better world (Blake & Masschelein, 2003 p. 39). The theoretical constructs of critical theory can be applied to practical situations through "the art of imagining", not just "the science of reasoning" (Grundy 1996, p. 109. See also, Calhoun 1995). Grundy drew on Habermas' ideas of 'communicative competence', which suggest that social life is constituted through the communicative practices of individuals. She pointed out that implicit in this concept is the requirement for each individual to have equal opportunity to contribute argument and to challenge others so that truth claims can be validated. These conditions are grounded in social justice to ensure that "the force of the better argument" (Grundy 1996, p. 111) is not the prerogative of those with the most power.

Grundy (1996) proposed contesting truth claims through questioning decisions from a social justice standpoint, such as: Could it be otherwise? Is this true in every instance and for those on the margins of the organisation? Is this appropriate for all those who will be affected by the decision? Through such acts of empathic imagination, or questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised and absent others, those whose voices could otherwise be drowned by the voices of authority can be drawn vicariously into the debate and possibilities are opened up for the

voicing of experience by other means than scholastically presented argument. Also proposing the use of an empathic imagination, Kearney (1988) suggested a fine line exists between postmodern scepticism and the loss of a "properly human imagination" (p. 361). He offered a revised version of imagination rather than submit to pessimism and paralysis, believing that an "ethical imagination" (p. 361) requires that the inalienable right of the other to be recognised and heard is respected.

If it is imagination that makes empathy possible, it has a central role in critical research with young students. As Greene (1995) pointed out, it enables us to "cross the empty spaces" (p. 3) between ourselves and those we call 'other'. Wright Mills (2001) promoted "sociological imagination" as "the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self - and to see the relations between the two" (p. 8). Such imaginative invention may be considered a form of "utopian" thinking, however Halpin (1999) suggested that this could benefit education and lead to the development of radical and previously untried ideas, "putting to one side our assumptions about the existing order of things, and the current supposedly limits of change" (p. 347). In fact, the postmodern world of difference and uncertainty which our students inhabit invites them to dream and to imagine the unimaginable to maximise choices and freedoms, particularly within the otherwise constraining systems of education (O'Farrell 1999).

It can be argued that some restraint must be placed on the creative ability of the imagination when it is related to serious research, through the imposition of conceptual and empirical rigour (Giddens 2001, p. 1). Giddens, however, also encouraged sociological thought to "take an imaginative leap beyond the familiar" (p. 1) encouraging the use of "disciplined imagination".

Imagination and engagement

The range of views of imagination presented above (summarised in Table 1) provides a means of considering their application at various stages of working with marginalised young people.

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Each of these types of imagination has a place within education practice and can contribute to an engaging pedagogy where the necessary scaffolding and supportive spaces are in place. In the SaR project, the scaffolding is provided by university researchers and selected school staff working in a collegiate environment of trust and "parity of esteem" (Grundy 1998, p. 44). This collaboration is developed in introductory workshops attended by the student groups and one or two teachers from each of the participating schools. The university researchers facilitate this initial process, attempting to ensure that an empathic and ethical framework underpins all activities and decisions. Fundamental principles of student decision-making and student ownership of the project, based on ideals of communicative competence, are introduced at this first stage.

The relationships between the co-researchers that are created through the project are often carried out in unfamiliar spaces, in which the traditional power relationships are challenged. Teachers, for example, may be reluctant to place themselves in a position of openness to challenges from students to the traditional hierarchies of educational structure (Rudduck & Flutter 2004). Similarly, students who have been marginalized may be disinclined to question and correct adults, uncertain of their own place in the power relationship (Rudduck 2003). The collaboration of disaffected students with teachers and university educators as co-researchers allows for many opportunities to re-examine student-teacher relationships. The introductory workshop activities reinforce that, in participatory action research, the relative type, source, and extent of knowledge of the participants provide the starting point for relationships based on equality and are the foundation of a parity of esteem. Within this relationship, the role of professional researchers is to offer their research experience and to encourage some theorising of the data obtained (Greenwood & Levin 2000), whilst the role of students is to bring local knowledge and expertise to the research. The teachers' role is to provide care and official support to their student group and to offer advice on the systems level context of the research activities.

The introductory activities also provide opportunities for the engagement of critical imagination to "jar" students out of their usual ways of thinking (Noone & Cartwright 2005, p. 3) and to initiate a process of "conscientisation" (Freire 1998) through which the students can gain an understanding of the power relationships that constrain them.

The students' creative imaginations are also engaged in the first instance so that they can see a reason for participation. Throughout the project, their empathic imaginations are engaged so that they can see a purpose in maintaining their involvement and their critical imaginations are engaged so that they can take advantage of the empowering potential of the project and finally imagine themselves as future university students.

Following the introductory workshop, the student research groups return to their schools with an action plan developed by them to begin investigating local barriers to tertiary participation. With the guidance of their teachers and university researchers, the students lead the research and develop action to address their findings.

The project activity of one particular student group exemplifies, in data drawn from the author's doctoral research (Bland 2006) and the students' own research reports, the place of each type of imagination in their educational engagement and empowerment. The students, whose classroom behaviour had seen them marginalised to a "last chance" program attached to their school, recently undertook research into low tertiary aspiration at their school. The program coordinator saw the university's SaR project as having potential to engage these Year 10 school resistors in a new and purposeful way. Initially, the appeal of the project was to the students' fantasy imaginations. Like most of the student group, Chas[1] conceded in an interview that he agreed to become involved in the project because it would give him time away from school, and it sounded like it might be fun. He had become labelled as a 'problem student' and had very poor relationships with staff and, like his friends, he claimed that he was simply bored with school.

This group of students, working in collaboration with a supportive teacher and the university researchers facilitating the SaR project, investigated the attitudes and aspirations of their peers towards university education. Their critical imaginations were given voice in this aspect of the project as they analysed the data and highlighted system failings that had contributed to a lack of information about university. Simultaneously, their empathic imaginations were activated, with the knowledge that they could make a difference for others being a key factor in their continuing participation. Employing creative imagination, they addressed their peers' concerns through a DVD that included

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[1] Names of project participants mentioned in this article are pseudonyms

interviews with current university students from similar backgrounds, demonstrating that these concerns could be overcome. None of the participants had previous experience in film-making so they had to learn a new set of skills, such as storyboarding, soundwork, interviewing and editing, and all associated administrative tasks. The success of the DVD took the team by surprise and, since being launched at a students-as-researchers conference at the university, it has won two awards with two key students being guest speakers at three more conferences. A teacher reported that Chas and his friend, Mick, who was also a key player in the creation of the DVD, were becoming very confident in public speaking. One educational association requested a copy of their paper presentation at an interstate conference to publish in their journal. Further, at the presentation of a film industry award for the Best Secondary Documentary, the young students "rubbed shoulders with (and were congratulated by) Queensland's biggies in the film industry" (interview) and other independent film makers, all of whom were also up for awards.

The DVD has had a profound impact on the school, encouraging other students to investigate tertiary options, and, as the reputation of the DVD grew, new respect was generated for its creators among school staff with relationships between the teachers and the students improving greatly. Not only did Chas and Mick remain at school to complete Year 12, but Chas became school captain and subsequently enrolled in a university degree course, while Mick was considering an acting career. As noted by Rudduck and Flutter (2004) "disengagement can be reversed if students feel that significant others in the school are able to see and acknowledge some of their strengths" (p. 70).

Improved relationships with teachers also developed at another high school involved in the SaR project, through the work of Indigenous Australian students. One teacher reported that the students' findings and their recommendations resulted in increased awareness in the school community of Indigenous issues and a "mind-shift" among staff that included discussions of how Indigenous culture could be recognised within the school curriculum. The student participants themselves had, according to the school's project coordinator, set a benchmark for other Indigenous students, giving them the confidence to acknowledge their origins and to talk about their culture with their peers. In achieving these results, the project participants realised two of the major objectives of their project: raising the visibility of Indigenous students within the school, and increasing Indigenous students' sense of belonging to the school. Again, empathic imagination provided the motivation for student involvement.

The ways in which students have used the faculty of imagination in this project demonstrate its role in educational engagement, assisting disaffected students to see mainstream education as a reasonable alternative to self-marginalisation. Many stories of student empowerment have been reported by the project participants while schools have credited participation in the SaR project with increasing a general awareness of tertiary education options among their student cohort. The students' insights represent "voices of possibility and hope" for themselves and others who are too often in schools where their own knowledges "are ignored and/or intentionally shut out" (Butler 1998, p. 108).

The DVD makers, like many marginalised students who have taken part in this long-running SaR project, claimed that they had been given little if any encouragement to consider university as an option. Layla, for example, was told that she "should quit and not even think about going to uni" (interview) while others in her school, particularly those of Pacific Islander background, complained of never having been given information relating to university courses. Typical of the student participants were Jean, an Indigenous student with a poor attendance record, and Wes, a completely self-supporting teenager. Neither Jean nor Wes had received advice or encouragement from their schools to consider a university course. Following involvement in the SaR project, however, Jean surprised her teachers through her positive change of attitude towards her education, her university aspiration, and gaining a place in an education course at a local university. Wes gained entry to the same university having found out through his involvement in the SaR project about alternative entry options for which he was eligible. A key role of the SaR project in these cases was to provide experiences and information to assist the participants to imagine themselves as university students.

These instances illustrate the potential, given supportive environments, for marginalised students to use their imaginations to build bridges back to mainstream education, if it can be seen as a viable and useful option.

Imagination and empowerment

While university entrance is a very welcome result of the SaR project participation, it is not the only objective. It is, though, an indication of empowerment gained through the project and of active agency, as was the ability of some

students to make an informed decision that university did not offer a suitable pathway. Empowerment in this sense is the process in which students gain agency through participating in and critiquing the relevant discourse. "We all make sense of the world with the discourse we have access to" (Smyth & Hattam 2001, p. 411) and one of the strengths of the SaR project was to immerse the participants in the language of education.

Via the project, many students developed a sense of agency, essential to being effective actors in the discourse of education. As illustrated in the case of self-proclaimed 'problem student', Chas, the opposition displayed in mainstream classrooms by many of the participants was not carried into the project, the labels previously attached to them were discarded, and new relationships with education and teachers were formed. Further, students' expectations of themselves, crucial in understanding how their decisions are investments in their own futures (Johnson & O'Brien 2002), were significantly raised. The features of the SaR project identified by the students for their changed self-expectations, agency and positive engagement, summarised according to the types of imagination involved, include:

Critical imagination:

- the process of conscientisation and overcoming uncritical acceptance of existing conditions

- the establishment of a community of research leading to a sense of belonging and purpose in which teachers and students learn together;

- realising that all project participants and their schools genuinely valued their input and that they had much to offer that was worthwhile;.

Empathic imagination:

- ownership of the outcomes and the ability to make decisions affecting their learning environment and of essential help to others;

- Working in cooperative teams rather than in competition;

- mutual respect and parity of esteem in which each participant was able to bring particular skills and knowledges to the research process.

Creative imagination:

- working in a scaffolded environment in collaboration with and alongside teachers, peers and university researchers;

- focusing on real life, relevant problems connected with their own realities;

- learning from mistakes, the action research methodology allowing students to take risks, trial ideas, make mistakes and keep learning.

While the SaR approach is only one example of creating circumstances through which students can be empowered to see for themselves the value of re-engaging with mainstream education, these elements of the project are significant in that the students themselves have identified them as key features of educational engagement. It is suggested that these features may, therefore, be extrapolated and applied to regular classroom activities to assist teachers to maintain the connectivity of at-risk students. The scaffolded approach of the SaR model offers a means to reverse disengagement by listening to the voices of marginalised students (Rudduck & Flutter 2004) through establishing dialogue between the margins and the mainstream (Greene 2007). Essentially, the student researchers have been able to use the tools of imagination to construct bridges to re-engagement with education for which they are responsible and which they own.

 Where students have chosen the margins of schooling as an act of resistance to being forced to comply with practices and school cultures that they perceive as having little relevance to their lives, well-intentioned government and school strategies to re-engage marginalised students may be doomed to failure, particularly where they enforce regimes of attendance in activities that have contributed to student alienation. Such strategies may also inadvertently reinforce the labels and self-fulfilling prophecies (Graham 2007) that can condemn educationally disadvantaged students to mediocrity. Rather than attempting to bring these young people back to the mainstream through coercion, a preferable action may be to work with the students in the spaces that they have chosen, to listen to and support

them in imagining and realising their place in mainstream education. As Greene (1995) observed, "it takes imagination on the part of the young people to perceive openings through which they can move" (p. 14). A students as researchers approach offers one means by which marginalised students may find empowerment through imagination, discover those openings, and build for themselves bridges to connect them back with the mainstream.

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Type	sub-type	attributes	theorist
empathic		· questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised others · voices of the marginalised · empowering	Grundy (1996) Greene (1995) Wright-Mills (2001)
	ethical	· inalienable right of the other to be recognised and heard	Kearney (1988)
critical	reflective	· unsettling · disruptive · challenging	Fine (1994)
	sociological	· investigative · hermeneutic	Wright-Mills (2001)
	disciplined	· restrained · rigorous	Giddens (2001)
	utopian	· trying new ideas · radical	Giddens (2001) Halpin (1998)
	critically-pragmatic	· tempered by reflection	Maxcy (1991)
creative	poetic	· inventive · increased empathy	Kearney (1988)
	pragmatic	· problem-solving	Maxcy (1991)
	grounded	· theoretical and practical	Fielding (2001)
fantasy	· daydreams · reverie · déjà vu · remembrance	· unproductive	Maxcy (1991)

Table 1: A typology of imaginations (Bland 2006)

Author's bionote

Derek Bland is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology. He was a secondary art teacher and has since had many years` involvement as a practitioner, researcher, and administrator in programs to find creative ways to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Derek also has an interest in the central role of imagination in engaging the interest of at-risk students' interest in education. He is currently working with students at schools that serve low income areas in a series of projects relating to educational engagement and aspiration.