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“To educate you to be smart”: Disaffected students and the purpose of school in the (not so clever) “lucky country”

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Abstract

This paper contributes to conversations about school, post-compulsory and further education policy by reporting findings from a three-year study with disaffected students who have been referred to special “behaviour” schools. Contrary to popular opinion, our research finds that these “ignorant yobs” (Tomlinson, 2012) do value education and know what it is for. They also have aspirations for a secure, productive and fulfilled life, although it may not involve university level study. Importantly, we found that students who responded negatively with regard to the importance of schooling tended to envision future lives and occupations for which they believed school knowledge was unnecessary. The implications of this research for school, post-compulsory and further education policy are discussed.

Keywords: student aspirations, alternative schooling, social mobility, post-compulsory and further education policy.

Introduction

'Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck.'

(Horne, 1964)

Australia first became known as "the lucky country" when Donald Horne penned his searing cultural critique of the same name in the 1960s. Gifted with huge mineral deposits, enormous land mass and warm climates, Australians have long been "content, as mere colonials, to send raw materials off to the rest of the world" (Melleuish, 1997, 211). Decade-long droughts followed by cataclysmic floods, volatile commodity prices, free trade agreements and globalisation were yet to hit but when they did, they hit hard. Australian manufacturing, in particular, had no answer to Japanese (then Taiwanese, Korean, and now Chinese and Bangladeshi) imports (Charlton, 2007). From transistor radios to cars, clothing and even food, scores of Australian-made products were slowly but surely priced out of their own market. The effect on the low-skilled labour market was immense (Charlton, 2007). Between 1973 and 1983, Australian manufacturing collapsed "with more than 200,000 [16.6% of manufacturing] jobs disappearing in that ten-year period … Only the Netherlands (16.9%) and the UK (29%) fared worse" (Megalogenis, 2012, 146). As low-end manufacturing was the destination of many non-academic early school leavers (Slee, 1998), unprecedented numbers of young people began joining the unemployment lines, particularly in the older manufacturing states of Victoria and New South Wales (Galliott & Graham, 2014).

Like other developed countries in the dry grip of post-modernity (Tomlinson, 2012), Australia has long grappled with what to do about the rise in young people for whom there are not enough jobs. This particular policy problem first rose to national prominence during the 1989-90 downturn when youth unemployment hit 40% nationally. Warning that Australia was on her way to becoming "a banana republic" our then Treasurer, Paul Keating, infamously described this downturn as "the recession we *had* to have" (Switzer, 2012, np). These were prophetic words for our last recession acted as a coming-of-age experience. Instead of relying on her luck, Australia was to become the "clever country"; one that invested in people, ideas and technology (Melleuish, 1997). One idea that

gained particular purchase during this period was human capital theory (Lingard, Porter, Bartlett & Knight, 1995), which positioned people with knowledge and skills as essential to economic growth and international competitiveness (Taylor & Henry, 1994). Education became viewed by the Hawke-Keating Federal government "as the human resources engine needed to "fire" the clever country" (Henry, 1992, 400), and it quickly sought to increase its influence on all levels of state-run education.[1]

Ambitious and far-reaching reforms to realise the clever country agenda through a "triad" pathway model of school, vocational and university education ensued (Lingard et al., 1995). First in the government's sights was low attainment and early school leaving, the alleviation of which it was believed would reduce youth unemployment and better prepare young people for further education, training and work (Polesel & Rice, 2012). The target set by the 1991 Finn Review was for 95% of 19-year-olds to have completed Year 12, have a post-school qualification, or be in formally recognised education programs by 2001 (Finn, 1991).[2] To enable this, the authors recommended that changes be made to make the academic school curriculum more inclusive and "relevant to the world of work" (Symes, 1995, 262). Vocational curriculum subjects and VET qualification credits were subsequently introduced with the aim of increasing senior school participation in government comprehensive schools, which traditionally experienced the lowest secondary school retention rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, np). National retention rates subsequently rose from an average of 34.8% in 1981 to 74% in 1995 (Taylor, 2002).

To improve access and increase participation in higher education, Universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were merged to create a Unified National System, resulting in a 35.8% increase in university enrolments between 1987 and 1991 (Gallagher, Osborne & Postle, 1996). The vocational education system was conceptualised as a mid-level stepping stone between school and employment or further education and training, with the Federal government going so far as to propose a takeover of the state-owned Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system in 1991 (Lingard, Porter, Bartlett & Knight, 1995). Whilst that move was rejected by the states, Federal government

influence on all levels and aspects of education increased year on year; so much so, that Seddon (1994) claimed,

> [t]hese restructurings have changed the parameters of the educational debate. Today what is at issue is not education, but education and training, not state-based education but an education system that is national in focus. (65)

As forewarned by researchers at the time however, "tensions and contradictions in the underlying logics within and between" TAFE and higher education have prevented the development of coherent "multiple pathways through post-compulsory schooling and higher education" (Henry, 1992, 408). We argue that this has been further complicated in recent years by tensions and contradictions that exist within compulsory school education itself; tensions and contradictions that have been exacerbated by lack of coordination and balance in education policy more broadly.

A policy preoccupation

One issue confounding the realisation of a unified system of education with clear articulation pathways in Australia has been the lack of government support provided to TAFE, which has been effectively squeezed out of the triad by a "policy preoccupation" (Lingard et al., 1995, 4) that privileged school and university level education (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998). The intensity of this focus negatively affected the parity of esteem between TAFE and university (Lingard et al., 1995), some balance between which was necessary for the proposed triad to work.[3] Vocational education and training became victim to a status hierarchy (Lingard et al., 1995), and interest in TAFE subsequently declined with four times more students in Australia's largest state of New South Wales aspiring to university than TAFE (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998). Underpinned by the Federal government's higher education fee deferment program (HECS), aspiration translated into greater demand for university places during the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to significant growth in university funding from the Federal government.

Support for university education has further accelerated since the 2008 Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), which recommended that student places be uncapped to create a demand-driven university system. As part of a suite of educational reforms, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set a series of education participation targets: one of which aims to see 40% of 25-34 year olds holding a university degree by 2020, with 20% of those to be from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEPPP, 2010). This policy, together with the marketisation of vocational education and training (VET), has also been criticised for further contributing to the residualisation of TAFE; an institution within which disadvantaged students are over-represented, particularly at the lower qualification certificate level (Wheelahan, 2009). These are not the students articulating from VET to university however, as the majority of those who do have completed diplomas or associate diplomas and are from middle and high socioeconomic backgrounds (Wheelahan, 2009).

TAFE has since been subject to a series of uncoordinated and savage reforms, including state government funding cuts and Federal government-led privatisation via a voucher system that opened the vocational education and training market to "unfettered access by private providers" (Wheelahan, 2013, 4). TAFE fees have been re-introduced and have steadily increased; however, unlike private VET providers and universities, TAFEs have been excluded from offering their students FEE-HELP, a Federal government loan system (similar to HECS) that enables students to repay their fees once they are earning an income above a particular threshold. At the same time, the Federal government has put funding previously provided to TAFE out to tender, a move that has pitted TAFE against more nimble and sometimes, lower quality private providers (Kell, 2006). As these providers have had the advantage of less regulation, together with government funding support, they have been able to "cherry-pick" which courses they will offer and the types of students they will accept.

While TAFE has played a key role in providing educational opportunities for low-attainers and early school leavers for the last few decades (Ross & Gray, 2005), Reid and Young (2012) report that many TAFE's now require students to have already completed Year 12 and are reluctant to accept those with learning or behavioural difficulties. Supporting the articulation of disaffected early school

leavers is not therefore a priority of *any* institution in the new competitive vocational education market. These policy changes may not have been a problem if the clever country agenda had been successful and the original Finn target had been realised. As recently as 2009, however, Australia's Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate was just 83.5%, leading the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to significantly reduce national attainment targets to 90% of 20-24 year olds having attained at least Year 12 or equivalent or an AQF Certificate II or above (Keating, Savage & Polesel, 2013). This revision not only "lets schools off the hook" in terms of curriculum innovation and student outcomes (Keating, Savage & Polesel, 2013) but it operates on the assumption that adequate pathways for non-academic school leavers are within easy reach. Given that the objective of the original triad model was to promote successful transition from school to further education and/or employment, particularly for "at-risk" groups (Tait, 1995), it makes sense to examine how Australia has performed in this space before proceeding further.

Stones in the road…

Despite continuation of the "clever country" agenda by successive state and federal governments,[4] some 24% of young Australians still do not complete Year 12 (Wierenga, 2011). While school retention rates are a blunt measure that mask early entry to apprenticeships and post-compulsory education (Polesel & Rice, 2012), as of 2010 almost one quarter of a million teenagers were counted as not being in full-time education *or* work (Wierenga, 2011). Young men aged 15-19 years of age who are from disadvantaged backgrounds are deemed most "at-risk" of joining the long-term unemployment line (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). At 18.8%, the unemployment rate for teenage males not in full-time education was almost four times that of the adult unemployment rate in 2010 (Wierenga, 2011).

Within these deep pockets of youth unemployment lie Tomlinson's "ignorant yobs" and our "usual suspects" (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010): urban youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, young Indigenous people, and young people in rural areas (Taylor, 2002; Wierenga, 2011). The dominant perception has long been that these young people (and their parents) lack

aspiration and do not value education (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett, 1982). As members of these groups are statistically more likely to join the long-term unemployed, there has been mounting concern about the presence of a large and growing "juvenile underclass… waiting to sow disorder and destruction" (Bessant, 1995, 35). During the 1990s, these young people were positioned by the media as a new "breed of outlaw children who reject all help" (The Bulletin, 3rd April 1992, 48 as cited in Bessant, 1995, 35); a motif that was picked up by all levels of government but none so successfully as the New South Wales (NSW) Labor Government led by then Premier Bob Carr.

With education again perceived as the most appropriate social policy to effect micro-economic reform, the NSW Labor government campaigned on a 'tough on crime' agenda that included getting tough on unruly student behaviour, early school leaving and youth unemployment (Conway, 2006). While the Western Australian and Queensland governments adopted policies that resonated with the national agenda by increasing the compulsory school age to 17 and attempting to "democratise" the school curriculum with more vocational options (Polesel, 2008), the NSW government instead developed a network of alternative placements for disruptive students, including "35 behaviour schools, 22 suspension centres and 40 tutorial centres" (Patty & Gilmore, 2009, np). The aim of these settings is to rehabilitate younger students "whose behaviour [can] no longer be supported in their home schools" (DEC, 2011, 1), and to provide older students "with specialist support to increase their social skills, literacy and numeracy, vocational preparation and transition to an independent adult life style" (Vinson, 2002, 61). Over the last two decades, there has been significant increase in their use (Graham & Sweller, 2011).

Behaviour schools in NSW are similar to England's Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) except that they are fully government owned and operated. They fulfil much the same function as PRUs in that they service disaffected students who live in communities marked by school residualisation, high unemployment, concentrated social housing and limited infrastructure. Although initially established as a short-term intervention model (Conway, 2006), a government commissioned review has found that enrolments of up to 4 years in duration are not uncommon (Inca Consulting, 2009). Recent

research indicates that many students referred to these settings remain until they drop out in their early teens or graduate to juvenile detention (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010). In so doing, these young people have come to embody the problem of educational failure, youth unemployment and social disorder about which successive Australian governments have been so concerned. As in the UK, these students' lack of participation in further education has been framed by a deficit model around lack of aspiration and motivation (Archer & Yamashita, 2003).

Given the significant policy attention directed towards low-attainers and early school leavers over the last three decades and the relatively more recent focus on raising aspirations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bok, 2010; Smith, 2011), we were curious to learn what these young people had to say about the role of education in their futures and what this may tell us about recent policy emphases. As NSW has also employed behaviour schools in its repertoire of retention and engagement strategies, and because the students within them are portrayed as "menaces" who are beyond all hope (McDougall, 2011), we were particularly interested in whether the views of students in behaviour schools differed significantly from students both with and without a history of disruptive behaviour still enrolled in mainstream schools and, if so, *how* they differed.

Research Design & Methodology

The study, which was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP110103093), employed a cross-sectional mixed-method research design (Creswell, 2003) with 96 school students aged between 9 and 16 years (M = 12.31 years old, SD = 1.75). The research participants were recruited in three groups, including 33 students currently enrolled in behaviour schools, 21 students with a history of disruptive behaviour still enrolled in mainstream schools, and 42 students enrolled in mainstream schools with no history of disruptive behaviour. The behaviour school group was recruited first from five participating case-study special schools.[5] Three of the five behaviour schools were located in severely disadvantaged communities, one school in an area that is considered moderately disadvantaged, and one from an advantaged area (Vinson, 2007).

This mix is reflected in each school's score on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA).[6] As shown in Table 1 below, the majority of participants (77.08%) were from schools with ICSEA scores below the national mean of 1000 (800-999). Participants in the two mainstream groups were subsequently drawn from a range of primary and secondary "feeder" schools identified by each of our case-study behaviour school principals (see Table 2). The criteria used to identify students in each of the two mainstream groups was: (i) students aged between 9 and 16 years of age with a history of severely disruptive behaviour involving repeated detentions, complaints from teachers, visits to the principal's office, and suspensions; and (ii) students aged between 9 and 16 years of age without a history of severely disruptive behaviour: no detentions, complaints from teachers, visits to the principal's office or suspensions. Group membership of consenting students was verified with the participating principals from each of the mainstream feeder schools.

It is important to note that the majority of these "feeder" schools were those in which enrolments had been adversely affected by competitive school markets. The principals of Schools 8M and 16M, for example, commented during the recruitment process that the higher-performing children of "aspirational" parents usually went from the local government primary schools (5M and 6M) to low-fee paying Catholic and Independent schools, leaving their schools with a disproportionate number of academically challenged and challenging young people. This is reflected in the higher ICSEA scores and national assessment (NAPLAN) results achieved by students in the Catholic and Independent schools, despite all of these schools being less than a few kilometres apart. For example, the two Catholic and Independent "colleges" nominated by the principals of 8M and 16M as drawing higher performing students away from their schools have ICSEA scores one standard deviation above the mean and NAPLAN results that are "close to or above" the national average, whereas 8M and 16M have ICSEA scores that are two standard deviations below the mean and NAPLAN scores that are "substantially below" the national average. The academic performance of students in the corresponding behaviour school (1B) is lower again with 88% of Year 9 students in School 1B

reading at Band 6 or below (equivalent to the Year 5 national average), compared to 51% in School 8M and only 14% in the local Independent college.

Table 1: Distribution of participants by ICSEA range

ICSEA Range	Number of participants	Percentage
1100-1199	14	14.58%
1000-1099	8	8.33%
900-999	20	20.83%
800-899	54	56.25%
Total	96	100%

Table 2: Characteristics and number of participants for each participating school.

School ID	School Type	ICSEA Range	Number of Participants	Percentage
1B	Behaviour	800-899	5	5.21%
2B	Behaviour	1000-1099	5	5.21%
3B	Behaviour	900-999	1	1.04%
4B	Behaviour	800-899	6	6.25%
5M	Primary	800-899	3	3.13%
6M	Primary	800-899	12	12.50%
7B	Behaviour	800-899	9	9.38%
8M	Secondary	800-899	4	4.17%
9M	Secondary	900-999	3	3.13%
10M	Secondary	1000-1099	2	2.08%
11M	Secondary	1100-1199	4	4.17%
12M	Primary	900-999	5	5.21%
13B	Behaviour	800-899	1	1.04%
14M	Primary	1000-1099	1	1.04%
15B	Behaviour	900-999[7]	6	6.25%
16M	Secondary	800-899	14	14.58%
17M	Secondary	900-999	5	5.21%
18M	Secondary	1100-1199	9	9.38%
19M	Primary	1100-1199	1	1.04%
Total			96	100%

While student age did not vary between our three participant groups, $F(2,83) = 0.90$, $p = .41$, there were significantly more boys than girls in the behaviour school (100.0%) and mainstream behaviour groups (76.2%) than the mainstream group (40.5%), $\chi^2(2) = 31.17$, $p < .001$. This is consistent with enrolment trends more broadly, in which boys outnumber girls in separate special

educational settings by more than 5 to 1 (Graham, Sweller & Van Bergen, 2010). A number of factors contribute to the over-representation of boys, however, including the deliberate diversion of girls by regional placement panels to avoid the close mixing of troubled girls with troubling boys (Van Bergen, Graham & Sweller, in press). Finally, the majority of participants in each setting were from an Anglo-Australian background with a higher percentage of Indigenous students in the behaviour school group (12.1%), than the mainstream behaviour (4.76%), and mainstream groups (4.65%). This pattern is also consistent with broader enrolment trends with Indigenous students accounting for 5.5% of total enrolments in NSW government schools but 13.3% of enrolments in separate special educational settings (Graham, 2012).

Results

This paper reports on the differences between our three student groups with respect to the purpose of school and whether they see that purpose as consistent with their own aspirations. Our reason for comparing groups is to determine whether and in what ways students with severely disruptive behaviour – who, if the rhetoric surrounding them is to be believed, do not value education and lack aspiration – differ from students with and without a history of disruptive behaviour who are still in mainstream schools, and why. Part I of the results section draws on quantitative data from all 96 participants in response to five questions about the purpose and importance of school, their views on school work, what they would like to do when they leave school, and what they would like to be. Part II examines the individual responses of students in the behaviour school group more deeply to examine the nature of the significant differences found and to contextualise the quantitative findings. We conclude by contrasting what these students have said with the recent emphases in education policy that were outlined in the introduction to this paper.

Part I: Differences between groups

The first round interview featured up to 75 semi-structured questions[8], organised into eight thematic areas. For this paper, we analysed responses to the following questions, which were asked of all 96 participants:

1. "What is the purpose of school?"
2. "Is that important to you?"
3. "Do you enjoy schoolwork?"
4. "Do you know what you want to do when you leave school?"
5. "What do you want to be?"

Individual responses to each of these questions were coded by the authors using inductive content analysis to identify categories of responses arising from the data (Berg, 2001). The categories for each question were then tested by two research assistants who drew on the master coding schedule to independently code a common set of transcripts, noting when additional and/or different categories might be needed to capture the full scope of student responses. Their codes were then assessed and compared by the research team with revision to the master coding schedule where needed. This process was repeated with two additional sets of transcripts, until all possible response categories had been exhausted.[9]

To compare responses to each question, a series of chi-square analyses were conducted.[10] Significant differences were further tested by comparing the column proportions using a z-test with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. This enabled us to determine which groups differed significantly from one another and which did not.

Part I results

Students were first asked to tell us what they thought was the purpose of school. More than 85% of participants stated that school was for "learning" with no significant differences between our

three groups $\chi^2 = 0.53$, $p = .766$ (see Figure 1). There were also no group differences in the percentage of students (26%) who said that the purpose of school was to "get a job"[11], $\chi^2 = 0.61$, $p = .738$, however, a significant difference between groups was observed for "other" responses, such as "to make friends" or "to prepare you for life", $\chi^2 = 11.23$, $p = .004$. Mainstream students (40.5%) were more likely to give an "other" response, often in addition to more common responses, than were students in the behaviour school group (12.1%) or mainstream behaviour group (9.5%), *ps* < .05

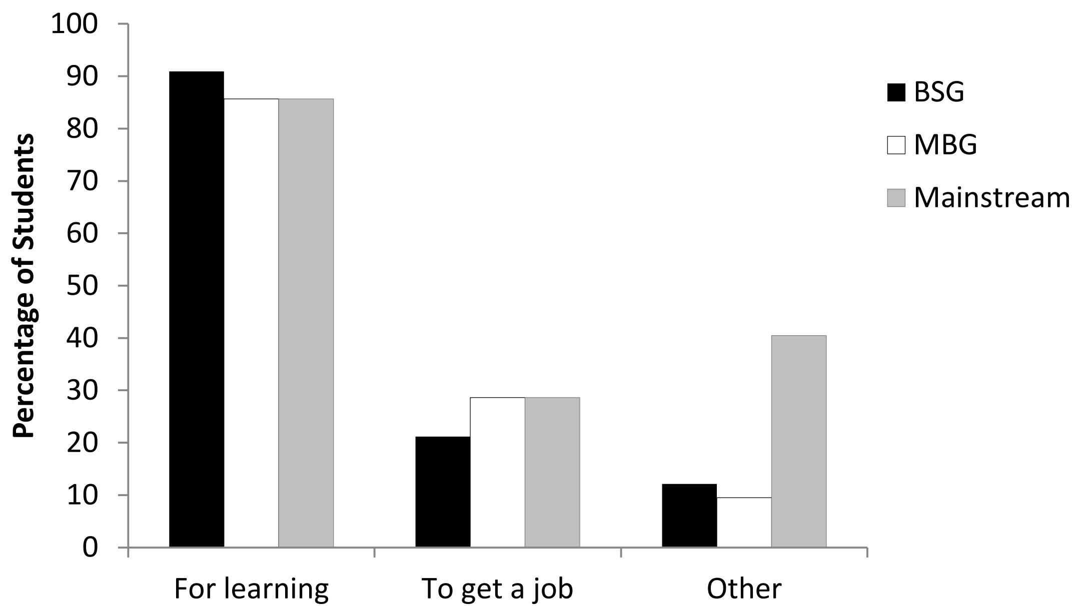

Figure 1. Students' beliefs about the purpose of schooling as a function of group membership. Key: BSG: behaviour school group, MBG: mainstream behaviour group.

After being asked the purpose of school, students were next asked if this was important to them. Responses were coded as positive or negative. Clear "yes" responses were coded as positive, whereas "no" and ambivalent responses (e.g. "not really") were coded as negative. A significant difference between groups was observed, $\chi^2 = 11.92$, $p = .003$. Almost all students in the mainstream group (97.6%) agreed that their perceived purpose of school was important to them, however, only 68.8% of students in the behaviour school group felt the same, $p < .05$ (no significant difference with either of the other two groups was observed for students in the mainstream behaviour group, *p*s > .05, with 85% agreeing that their perceived purpose of school was important to them). We note however

that, despite this significant difference, more than two-thirds of students in each of the three groups indicated that their perceived purpose of school *is* important to them. Thus our findings of group differences should not be used to suggest that disaffected students do not care about their education.

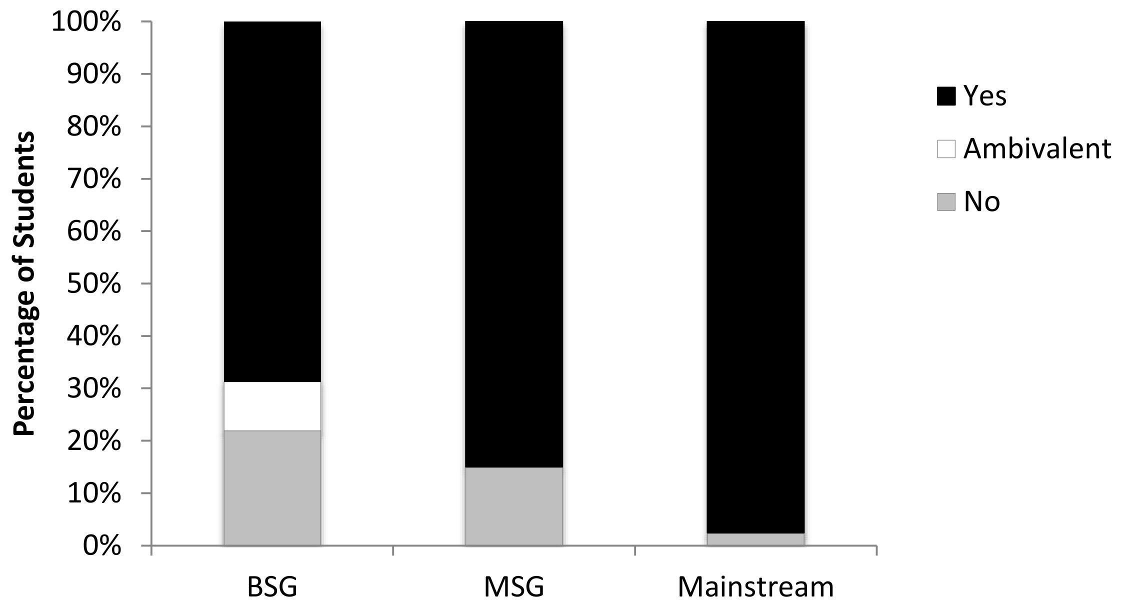

Figure 2. Students' beliefs about whether or not their perceived purpose of school is important to them, as a function of group membership

When asked if they enjoy schoolwork, a significant difference between groups was also observed, $\chi^2 = 21.93$, $p < .001$. Responses were coded as "positive", "negative", or "equivocal". There were no differences between groups in the number of equivocal responses given, *p*s > .05, with approximately half (47.7%) of all students indicating that they sometimes did and sometimes didn't enjoy schoolwork. There were however significant group differences in "positive" and "negative" responses. Students in the mainstream group were most likely to say that they did enjoy schoolwork (53.7%), with no student disagreeing outright (0.0%). In contrast, only 24.1% of those in the behaviour school group said that they enjoyed schoolwork and 34.5% saying that they did not: thus differing significantly from the mainstream group, *p*s < .05. Those in the mainstream behaviour group fell in the middle, with 33.3% agreeing and 5.6% disagreeing, *p*s > .05.

Finally, students were asked if they know what they want to do when they leave school. There were no significant differences between groups, $\chi^2 = 4.15$, $p = .387$, with 18.9% of students having no idea, 28.4% having some idea and 52.6% having a clear idea. Students who had some idea or a clear idea were asked to elaborate. Responses were categorised into professions, trades/apprenticeships, skilled vocations, unskilled vocations, and sports (see Figure 2). Significant differences between groups were observed for both professions, $\chi^2 = 9.11$, $p = .011$, and trades/apprenticeships, $\chi^2 = 7.06$, $p = .029$, but not for any other response categories, χ^2s < 1.64, *p*s > .440. More students in the mainstream group (64.3%) than the behaviour school group (30.3%) nominated a profession, $p < .05$, whereas more students in the behaviour school group (30.3%) than the mainstream group (7.1%) nominated a trade or apprenticeship, $p < .05$ (note that responses for the mainstream behaviour group did not differ significantly from either other group, *p*s > .05, with 40.0% nominating a profession and 25.0% nominating a trade/apprenticeship).

Summary of Part I results

As noted in the introduction to this paper, disaffected young people are often positioned as 'ignorant yobs' (Tomlinson, 2012) and 'outlaw children' (Bessant, 1995) who lack aspiration and who do not value education. This perception has informed policy measures aimed at raising aspirations and increasing school retention, however, our results indicate that the majority of our participants do not lack aspiration and nor do they disregard the value of education. Firstly, there were no significant differences between our three groups in their perceptions of the two main purposes of school with the majority in each group stating that the purpose of school was 'to learn' or 'to get a job'. Secondly, while a small but significant number of students in our behaviour school group responded negatively to the question "Is that important to you?" the majority of participants across all three groups indicated that their perceived purpose of school *is* important to them. Thirdly, there was a significant difference between groups in response to the question "Do you enjoy schoolwork?" with students in mainstream mainly positive in response and students in the behaviour school group mainly negative in response. Finally, while there were no differences between groups as to whether participants had no idea, some

idea or a clear idea about what they wanted to do when they left school, students in the behaviour school group were significantly more likely to want to enter a trade or apprenticeship than the students in our mainstream group who were more likely to want to enter a profession.

On the whole, these findings are inconsistent with the dominant perception that disaffected students lack aspiration and do not value education. However, given that a small but significant number of students in our behaviour school group gave responses that reflected this perspective, we considered it important to look more deeply at the reasons these students gave.

Part II: The dissenters

As this project was principally concerned with understanding the formative educational experiences and perspectives of excluded students, our behaviour school participants were asked more questions than the students in mainstream. This was necessary for three reasons. Firstly, our behaviour school students tended to be much less expansive – though no less expressive – in their answers. As such, it was important to clarify as much as possible what they meant without wearing out our tenuous welcome. Secondly, we asked considerably more questions of our behaviour school group because we wanted to learn *why* these students held the views they did and what this may tell us about schooling and disaffection more generally. Thirdly, given the negative educational experiences of the students with whom we were working, it was important to ensure that the interview did not come across as overly formal and stilted. To engage with each of these issues, the research assistants were instructed to tease out the responses of the behaviour school group and to follow the student's lead should they show interest in a particular topic. In the following section, we draw on the elaborative responses that each of the dissenting students gave following their initial answers to the structured questions that we analysed using quantitative techniques in Part I. As our dissenters typify the low attainers and early school leavers who were front in mind when the current policies aimed at improving school retention and pathways to further education and employment were originally conceived, we believe that these young people's views add value to the policy conversation.

Results

Only 11 students in our behaviour school group (33.33%) gave a negative or ambivalent response with respect to the importance of their perceived purpose of school (see Table 3 below). Each of these 11 students was male and from an Anglo-Australian background. Only one (Corbin, School 2B) was from an advantaged background.

Ten of these 11 boys associated the purpose of school with "learning" and one joked that it was "to get away from your parents".

> That's my point of view. That's what I reckon it is. A parent made it up so they can shoo their kids away for a few hours. (Rory, School 7B)

Table 3. Our 11 dissenters on the purpose and importance of school

		Purpose of School?			Is that important to you?	
Pseudonym	***Age***	***To learn***	***Get a job***	***Other***	***Definitive No***	***Ambivalent***
Zack	13	✓			Nuh.	
Max	13	✓			No.	
Aiden	12	✓			No.	
Patrick	16	✓			No.	
Cameron	13	✓			Nah.	
Rory	14			✓	Nah.	
Michael	12	✓			Nup.	
Daniel	16	✓				Not really.
Corbin	15	✓				Slightly.
Finn	12	✓				Sometimes.
Justin	13	✓				Sometimes.
11 boys	13.5	90.9%	0	9.01%	63.64%	36.36%

Not one of our 11 dissenters associated the purpose of school with getting a job. This was not because these young people did not value education or because they lacked aspiration, however. When asked what they would like to do when they left school, most had goals and some idea of what they

needed to do to achieve them (see Table 4 below). Very few, however, saw school or rather 'school learning' as the means to achieve those goals.

Table 4. Students' preferred careers and career pathway knowledge

Pseudonym	Preferred Career	Do you know what you need to do to become a ___________?
Zack	Reptile handler	Go to TAFE – got to go to TAFE and do a course there. A Reptile and Amphibian Care course… I've already looked into all of that.
Max	Ah, that's what I'm going to decide soon. When I hit 14, I'm going to start researching.	--
Aiden	Lion keeper	I'm not sure. I guess I could become an assistant at the zoo for a while until they would actually give me - they would say that I'm doing good and they'll want me to actually have the job.
Patrick	Paramedic	You've got to get your school certificate, you've got to go to TAFE and then you do your HSC.
Cameron	Builder	Get a trade. Go to TAFE.
Rory	Nothin' *yet*.	--
Michael	Policeman	Get my Year 10 certificate and then go to uni, study, like, police work and stuff, and then I want to go into the police thing.
Daniel	Professional rapper	Music degree at TAFE.
Corbin	Um, I haven't really thought about that yet, much, at all, really.	--
Finn	Carpenter	I've got to go to the university (sic) [laughs].Yeah, then I've got to go to get my building certificate, and then… they said it takes about four years.
Justin	Lawyer	Go to uni. Study law.

Not surprisingly, the majority of our dissenters said that they did not enjoy schoolwork and that the main reason that they got in trouble was for not doing it (see Table 5). As we discuss below, this may be because the type of learning that the majority of these boys associate with *school* bears little relation to the types of learning and future occupations in which they are interested.

Table 5. Our 11 behaviour school dissenters on school work and getting in trouble

	Do you enjoy school work?			**What do you get in trouble for?**	
Pseudonym	***Yes***	***No***	***Equivocal***	***Physical Aggression***	***Persistent Disobedience***
Zack		✓		Fightin' 'n swearin'.	
Max		✓		Hitting.	
Aiden			✓		Not doin' work.
Patrick			✓		Not doing work.
Cameron		✓			Backchattin'. Teacher tells me to do something, I tell them no.
Rory			✓		Always walkin' out of class.
Michael		✓			Swearin'.
Daniel		✓			Um… it's usually for not doing my school work.
Corbin		✓			Not doin' work.
Finn			✓		Not doin' work and callin' out in class and that.
Justin		✓			Not doing the work, being rude, talkin' back.

Only three of our 11 dissenters – Rory, Corbin and Max – had no idea as to what they wanted to do when they left school. While this was a higher percentage than our full participant cohort, the rest of our dissenters had a relatively clear idea of what they would like to do. The majority (Patrick, Michael, Zack, Aiden, Cameron, Daniel and Finn) wanted to pursue what they perceived to be practical "hands-on" occupations; e.g., paramedic, policeman, reptile handler, lion keeper, builder and carpenter. Interestingly, these occupations require students to spend a few more years in further education and training, which one might assume would act as a deterrent to boys who say they don't like "learning" and do not enjoy schoolwork. In the main, however, these seven boys were undaunted by the prospect of further education or training. As we discuss below, this may be because they tended to distinguish between "work learning" and "school learning" with the former being viewed as far less objectionable than the latter.

School learning vs "stuff that actually does matter"

The tediousness and irrelevance of school learning was a consistent theme across these seven participants' responses, although there were subtle differences as to how this was expressed. Some appeared to distinguish between "getting an education" which they saw as a broader abstract good and "learning" which they associated with boredom and school. For example, Michael (aged 12) said that he wanted "an education" but that he found "learning" boring.

> I don't know. It's boring. Like, learnin's easy, but... like, it's not... I don't care about it. I like it, but it's... I don't know. It's good, like I want an education, but yeah, that's all. (Michael, School 4B)

Incidentally, Michael was one of a number of our behaviour school students who stated that he began disliking school around Year 3 because "it just got boring and harder". He nominated maths was his greatest area of difficulty and said that he would prefer to stay at the behaviour school rather than return to mainstream: "Because I get to do woodburnin' (sic), um… woodwork and everyfink else." Michael, it seems, has no problem with practical "hands-on" approaches to learning, however, so powerful is his received understanding of what *constitutes* learning (academic schoolwork), that he does not even associate the practical activities that he *does* enjoy with learning.

Our other dissenters appeared to distinguish between "school learning" and "work learning". For example, when asked what he thought was the purpose of school, Patrick (age 16, School 2B), also answered "learning". This, he said, had been important to him once but "not anymore" because he was about to leave school to do his HSC at TAFE with the aim of becoming a paramedic. Like Michael, Patrick appears to associate "learning" with school and an experience that he did not enjoy. The fact that going to TAFE will also involve "learning" does not appear to bother him, perhaps because paramedic studies will be a more focused and directed form of learning in which *he* has a specific interest.

Patrick was not the only dissenter to distinguish between 'school learning' and 'work learning'. Thirteen year old Zack (School 1B) has dreams of becoming a reptile handler and doesn't see the point of what he is now learning at school. Neither does Aiden (age 12) who wants to be a lion keeper but is frustrated that he is able to learn more from books than he can from school.

> They don't teach me anything about lions! They say if you go to school they'll teach you, but I haven't… The work I want to do, it hasn't taught me one thing… (Aiden, School 4B)

As one of our follow-up questions, we asked Aiden what he would *like* to learn at school. Like Patrick, Michael and Zack before him, Aiden's response suggests that he is not opposed to "learning" when it involves, as he put it: "Stuff that actually does matter if you're going to go for a job".

A similar view was expressed by Cameron (age 13) who wants to be a builder and is waiting to join the family business where he says his father and uncle will teach him everything he needs to know. Like the majority of our dissenters, Cameron had said that the purpose of school was "to learn" but that he didn't need to learn what schools *teach*:

> Because if I want to learn, I'll learn off my dad… Building. And my dad, my uncle - both my uncles - are builders. (Cameron, School 7B)

These views were not restricted to students in behaviour schools with similar views being expressed by students in our mainstream behaviour group. The perception of a disconnect between 'school learning' and 'work learning' was best articulated by Jackson (age 15, School 17M), who noted that the purpose of school was "to educate you to be smart". Like a number of students who responded negatively when we asked if their perceived purpose of school was important to them, Jackson already had a clear idea of what he wanted to be (an air-conditioning mechanic) and had an apprenticeship lined up to start early the following year. This does not mean that Jackson does not value 'education' however. As can be seen from his full response below, Jackson is clearly saying that "to be smart" is not of most importance to him and that there is more to learn *beyond* the academic knowledge that is taught in schools.

Interviewer:	What do you think school is for?
Jackson:	To educate you to be smart.
Interviewer:	Is that important to you?
Jackson:	Not really.
Interviewer:	No? Why not?
Jackson:	Just school doesn't teach you life skills. You've got to get more of life than you've got to do at school.

Learning (not) to labour

The voices of these young people coalesce around at least two issues of importance for education policy. Firstly, there is the enduring issue of the academic school curriculum and the alienating impact that it still has on non-academic young people who prefer "hands-on" practical subjects. Secondly, there is the question of educational pathways and the closing down of vocational opportunities for young people who have rejected academic learning but who still have aspirations for and the potential to secure a productive and fulfilled life. We will discuss each of these "wicked problems" in turn to point to what we think needs to change to improve the educational experiences and life opportunities of these young people. We begin with the drive to increase school retention and the problem of the academic school curriculum, and conclude with the yawning gap that now exists between school education and further education and training for disaffected, early school leavers.

Wicked Problem 1: The academic school curriculum

As we described in the introduction to this paper, Australia's fixation with the "clever country" agenda has contributed to a policy preoccupation with year 12 completion and university education. This preoccupation has been expressed in a myriad of ways, not all of which are consistent or complementary. Of relevance to our 11 dissenters – or indeed all of our participants who said they do not enjoy schoolwork – is the failure of successive governments to effectively address the exclusionary effects of the academic school curriculum (Teese & Polesel, 2003). This is an issue that has been made necessary by the aim of increasing school retention but which, at the same time, is complicated by the desire to lift student attainment and university entry. Of these competing policy

objectives, the latter has been dominant leading to the privileging of academic knowledge, attainment and pathways over vocational knowledge, attainment and pathways (Keating, Savage & Polesel, 2013).

Whilst we acknowledge the stratifying effects of vocational versus academic streaming (Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010), this is not an inevitable outcome. In Finland, for example, basic or comprehensive education extends to Year 9 (with an optional tenth year) at which point students can choose either of two routes: the vocational school or the upper secondary academic school, each of which can lead to university entry. This dual system, which is underpinned by strong parity of esteem, is one of Finland's many educational achievements and contributes to their relatively high (avg. 90%) retention rate (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). Strong opposition to vocationalism in Australia, however, has so far thwarted the development of similarly equitable curriculum pathways (Symes, 1995; see Polesel, 2008).

While the bid to increase senior school retention in Australia was accompanied by increased diversification of the senior school curriculum (Symes, 1995), vocational education still lacks the "state-sanctioned credibility of the academic curriculum" (Polesel, 2008, 615). This deficit in parity of esteem is material, as well as perceptual, with inbuilt disincentives for students to participate in vocational subjects (Keating et al., 2013). Unlike the Finnish model, vocational secondary school subjects do not count towards the attainment of a university entrance rank, resulting in a "terminal track" for students who do not take sufficient numbers of academic units. Less students (particularly less "able" students) selecting vocational subjects has residualised VET in Schools (VETiS), which further reduces the diversity of subject choice whilst, at the same time, compounding stratification. School-based VET subjects are also relatively basic and are not designed to lead to specific vocational outcomes, leaving many students without a platform for progression, even in the post-compulsory (but increasingly competitive) VET system (Polesel, 2008).

Problems of implementation do not mean that vocational options are inherently second-rate or that we should abandon the original intent to better engage non-academic students who are now forced

to remain at school until the age of 17 (Reid & Young, 2012). Indeed, the stubborn consistency of Australia's school retention rate, which has hovered around 75% for the last two decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), together with the enduring problem of youth unemployment (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014), now make it imperative not simply to address these implementation problems but to ensure that these curriculum options lead somewhere and that non-academic young people know that there is a worthwhile and valued pathway available to them. Addressing the issues with senior school subject choices will not alone fix the problems that our dissenters have with school, however. This is because VET courses are not available to students until Year 11; the year most students now become old enough to leave (Reid & Young, 2012).

Wicked Problem 2. Availability of coherent & viable pathways for disaffected students

Recall that the average age of our dissenters was 13.5 years. Each had been excluded from the mainstream school system in the senior primary or early secondary phase of schooling. Each expressed a preference for the "practical" subjects (e.g., cooking, woodwork, spray-painting) to which they had been exposed at the behaviour school. The majority began experiencing academic difficulties in the early years of school and *none* had made it to the senior secondary years: the point at which they may have had the opportunity to enrol in vocational courses and thereby switch from a predominantly academic curriculum to one that they may find more relevant to their future aspirations. The future for these boys is bleak – unless they gain access to further education and training pathways that can help them to find a job and get a life, rather than ending up (as some of our participants already have) in juvenile detention. As we described in the introduction to this paper however, further education and training options for disaffected early school leavers are fast disappearing.

Four of our 11 dissenters specifically named TAFE as their desired learning pathway, which signals that the partnerships some of our case-study behaviour schools have built with local TAFE organisations are having some positive effects. It also indicates that TAFE can play a very important role in the provision of alternative pathways and the social mobility of "at risk" groups – *if* it is

adequately supported to do so. As we discussed in the introduction to this paper however, the creation of a competitive vocational education and training market has placed a premium upon particular types of courses and particular types of students, with the current pressures on and directions for TAFE suggesting that our dissenters may have nowhere to go once they age out of the behaviour school, even *if* that school is successful in raising their aspirations.

Somewhere in the policy process the realisation that work has benefits *in and of itself*, regardless of the credential required to attain it has become lost. According to industry groups (Skills Australia, 2010), the most acute skills shortages are in the technical as opposed to intellectual fields and thus, an increase in vocational qualifications is most needed. Workforce surveys have also found that many Australians with high-level qualifications are not using those qualifications and skills in their current occupation (Skills Australia, 2010). Since the mid-1980s, however, a "policy preoccupation" with academic achievement and university education has led to incoherence and disjuncture at the middle tier of the pathway triad, creating a bottle-neck for non-academic young people who do not like school but who still have aspirations for a productive and fulfilled life. Such indicators suggest that in privileging certain pathways, occupations and qualifications over others, the "clever country" agenda has succeeded in privileging academic forms of knowledge over technical knowledge and expertise; a stance that may prove to be self-defeating.

Conclusion

Not one of the young people that we interviewed said that they wanted to become a criminal or that they were planning on a life of indolence. Neither did they nominate careers that no longer exist. While one of our dissenters nominated a career that requires university study, the majority were interested in practical "hands-on" occupations that would provide them with a life – something that they associated with security, a house, family and love. As discussed however, Australian post-compulsory and further education policy has been focusing on driving participation in higher education for the "clever" and, to a lesser extent, the "unlucky clever" (academically able students from disadvantaged backgrounds). The plain "unlucky" – those who experience difficulty in schools

and with learning and who are most in need of TAFE's education programs – appear to have been forgotten in the drive to increase the number of future knowledge workers. Rather than contributing to the recruitment, retention and articulation of "at risk" groups therefore, changes to post-compulsory and further education policy over the last two decades have simply compounded social stratification, resulting in a "terminal track" for disaffected, early school leavers.

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Appendix

Agreed codes for each focus question.

Question	Coding
1. What is the purpose of school?	0 = Learn/get an education 1 = To get a job 2 = Other
2. Is that important to you?	0 = No 1 = Yes 2 = Ambivalent
3. Do you enjoy schoolwork?	0 = Negative 1 = Positive 2 = Equivocal
3. Do you know what you want to do when you leave school?	0 = No idea 1 = Some idea 2 = Clear idea
4. What do you want to be?	0 = Profession 1 = Trade 2 = Skilled Vocation 3 = Unskilled Vocation 4 = Sports 5 = Other

[1] This shift in perception was matched by a shift in organisation and the education portfolio was promptly incorporated into the Hawke government's new (mega) Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET).
[2] The Finn target of 95% of 19 year olds was revised down to 90% following the 1992 Carmichael Report (see Keating, Savage & Polesel, 2013).
[3] Although the original model implicated that TAFE would receive a significant upgrade, the decision by Dawkins to make university education his initial policy target worked to "consolidate the universities' status and sectional self-interest" (Henry & Taylor, 1994).
[4] Although the target was revised down to 90% Year 12 or equivalent participation and attainment by 2015, this national strategy was most recently endorsed by the 2007-2013 Rudd/Gillard Federal Labor Government and supported by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Some individual states have also picked up the 'clever country' agenda, exemplified by the Queensland Beattie Government's "Smart State" policy in the early 2000s.
[5] Additional behaviour schools were included as students moved from one behaviour school to another.
[6] All schools in Australia are given an ICSEA score: a calculation of the relative affluence of the school community (ACARA, 2013). ICSEA has a mean of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100. Note, as geographic information or single ICSEA scores could reveal the identity of the schools, only ICSEA ranges have been provided here.
[7] Where an ICSEA score was not available, a composite score comprising participating students' home postcode and the ICSEA score of their local government high school was constructed. Exact ICSEA scores are not reported as these could reveal participating schools' identities.
[8] Because we were interested in the effect of school exclusion, students in behaviour schools were asked more questions than students in mainstream. Unstructured prompts were issued to investigate student responses more deeply.
[9] To determine inter-rater reliability, two research assistants each independently coded 19 randomly chosen transcripts (20% of the total) using the revised master scheme. Agreement between the coders was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, which is generally considered acceptable for most research purposes if it is close to or above a benchmark of 0.8. For the target questions in our study, inter-rater reliability ranged from 0.87 to 0.92.
[10] More sophisticated binary and nominal regression analyses were conducted with ICSEA scores also entered into the analyses. As ICSEA was not a significant predictor in any analysis, however, we do not report these findings.
[11] Students were free to give multiple responses to each question: thus, percentages may not add to 100.