

# **‘Sent out’ and ‘Stepping Back In’: Stories from young people ‘placed at risk’.**

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This paper invokes the voices of young people who had been separated from mainstream schooling because they were positioned as ‘disengaged and ‘at risk of failing’. The authors argue that streaming students out of schooling needs serious questioning as an escalating number of young people are framed as non-performers within a globally competitive educational market. Throughout the paper we use critical ethnographic slices to expose the experiences of the 24 young people interviewed who together with mentors shared personal insights whilst attending a re-engagement program in Australia in the year 2010. Their responses unearth a ‘wickedness’ and a preoccupation during their schooling with performance and school improvement. In response, we privilege student interpretations of their own marginalisation as an activist form of ‘speaking back’ to the social and economic conditions and limitations dominating their lives.

Keywords: ‘at risk’ policy; pedagogical voices; ethnographic slices; critical ethnography; educational re-engagement; precarity.

## Introduction

*The risk of being labelled “at risk” is that youth will begin to see themselves the way the world sees them. (Peel 2013)*

At the outset, our ‘take’ on precarity is that it is a complex and multi-layered notion cascading through wider social and economic conditions, through to what happens to young people in school, and how this positions them in a fragmenting labour market. This paper investigates the contexts of young people separated from secondary schooling into a second chance program. It is argued that such programs are part of the establishment of fragmented and precarious labour market experiences (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, 139) because these young people were considered as ‘lacking self-motivation’ (Inui 2009, 179-180). Although these students gained various social and educational benefits from the program, we argue that moving them from mainstream is a politically slippery process because it does not challenge broader intersecting dynamics, ‘such as school conditions and societal factors’ (Kim and Taylor 2008, 207-208), that may have led to their expulsion in the first place. Gillies and Robinson (2012) argue that separating students is part of ‘a broader shift towards therapeutic models that locate problems within individuals and their families’ (171) thereby stigmatising them as *different, dis-engaged* and *at risk of failure* and does not ‘break the cycle of educational inequality’ (Kim and Taylor 2008, 216). du Bois-Reymond (2009, 36) explains that ‘in comparison with former generations, the future has become generally less predictable’ for the kind of young people we interviewed. The political economy of insecurity, according to Beck (2000), has had a domino effect because:

Paid employment is becoming precarious; the foundations of the social-welfare state are collapsing; normal life-stories are breaking up into fragments; old age poverty is programmed in advance, and the growing demands on welfare protection cannot be met from the empty coffers of local authorities. (3)

Our major aim, then, is to emphasise how the predicament of these young people has become even more precarious through various policy and regulatory processes. It is what Furlong and Kelly (2005, 223) argue should be understood as a ‘structural phenomenon’. For example, in conducting research of students excluded or suspended from school in places of rural impoverishment in Australia, Mills, Renshaw and Zipin (2013) discovered young people who were considered ‘a threat’ to schools in lowering ‘averages’ and ‘good outcomes’ on ‘standardised tests’ (13) and ‘seen as superfluous or threatening’ because the schools main focus was on its image (4). Rustique-Forrester (2005) found similar tensions in England, where the result of accountability measures had placed increasing pressure on students who were not performing (31). As Woodman and Wyn (2011, 24) confirm, it is the ‘emerging technologies’ relying on models of preventive science that are determining that these students are ‘at risk’. These simplistic measurements dominate because of neoliberal policy responses. When a neoliberal policy regime produces its own knowledge base (Connell 2013, 109), it cascades and filters a market agenda into schools with an emphasis on improvement, efficiency, measurement, image and codes of conduct. For many young people, especially like those we interviewed, this form of schooling is unwelcoming, inflexible and indifferent (Tuck 2011, 822) and paves a way for being socially positioned and categorised as a failure (Reed 1992, 33). It also denies them ‘greater room for post-16 manoeuvre’ plus their insecurity becomes not only more serious but persists for a longer time period (MacDonald 2009, 170).

Corporate schooling can ultimately result in significant numbers of young people being shuffled between schools, programs, across cities, regions and even states within countries like Australia, before they eventually find a welcoming place to learn, like those we interviewed at *Stepping Back In<sup>i</sup>*, a re-engagement program that we will

describe in a moment. At the time of writing this article, 70,000 young people were attending 900 different alternative programs in Australia (te Riele 2014, 12) and more than 2000 were on the waiting list of one single state in the country (Wilson, Stemp and McGinty 2011, 36). These figures follow trends in the USA as reported by Rumberger (2011, 209) citing 6000 alternative schools and in the UK, Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) note ‘alternative education is gathering momentum’ (6).

Our intention is not to disrespect significant pedagogical work established at *Stepping Back In* nor other re-engagement programs, but rather to emphasise the importance of building positive relationships in keeping young people engaged in their schooling. The stories, shared by young people who attended *Stepping Back In*, ‘hold a mirror’ of reflection on how mainstream education systems fail them (Mills et al. 2013, 14) and provide important messages of what instead did work for them; building trust, making commitments, developing responsibility, earning respect and experiencing routines and environs that built their confidence. Our contention is that these are valuable pedagogical features that should prevail in *all* schools, not just re-engagement programs.

When schools are ‘forced to compete’ (McGregor 2009, 346), arbitrary distinctions emerge between the academically inclined students and those deemed to be *at risk*, persuasive enough ‘to shape prevention policy across international borders’ (Woodman and Wyn 2011, 21). Alternative public schooling, consequently, is prone to become the ‘quick fix’ (Kim and Taylor 2008, 216) intervention for students believed to be failing, and yet, in the case of *Stepping Back In*, becomes a non-sustainable option. This is because the programme is prone to funding cuts, re-structures, staff quotas and changes in government policy, all causing insecurity — even in a place that was proving successful in building relationships. Losing collective and integrated partnerships within

communities and a place of learning and belonging can lead to further marginalisation not only for these young people, but also their families and significant adults and services working for them (te Riele 2006; Kim and Taylor 2008, 217).

By ‘listening to the opinions of young people’ (Rose and Shelvin 2004, 160) interviewed whilst attending *Stepping Back In*, we share their ‘lived experiences’ (van Manen, McClelland and Plihal 2007, 87) to argue that they are not the bad kids of the school ‘on the wrong side of the tracks’ (te Riele 2008, 5), but caught up in a ‘vicious circle of even greater marketization and even more controlling technologies and outcomes’ (Fielding and Moss 2011, 38) ‘that take little account of the life circumstances’ (McGregor and Mills 2012, 846).

### ***Stepping Back In***

To introduce *Stepping Back In*, we share excerpts from three of the students who joined the program in 2010 as to why they had left high school. **Rita** and **Genevieve**, both 15 years old, told us it was because they were considered ‘bad kids’. Rita is a victim of domestic violence and substance abuse and is also dealing with anger issues.

*I was kicked out of home for two months and when I went to go back into Merino Plains College the deputy yelled at me because I didn't have a uniform on so I told her to # off. (Rita)*

For non-Australian readers, we should point out that it is not unusual in rural Australian settings to encounter what amount to very mono-cultural communities—hence our reference to non-Anglo students (American Indian, Koori and Aboriginal) as being the exception. Genevieve, from American Indian background, attending the same school as Rita, informed us that she had experienced a lack of support from her teachers, especially involving issues of race:

*I didn't think they cared so I stayed away. A few weeks ago someone called me 'black nigger'.*

**Tamara**, a 15 year old Koori Aboriginal girl, told us that she felt victimised when enrolled at a primary school in *Merino Plains*. She was then transferred to an alternative school for students aged 10-12 years, located 10 kilometres from *Merino Plains* in a bushland reserve where she was bussed to and fro each day. This schooling arrangement did not last long because:

*There were racist people out there and I got into lots of fights.* (Tamara)

In sharing the often 'cast aside as unimportant' (Mazzei 2008, 59) stories of Tamara, Genevieve and Rita, we offer instead an 'insight into the procedures and actions which have either supported or inhibited their learning' (Camilleri-Cassar 2014, 10). In contrast to policy that leads to practices that push these students out of school, what their stories disclose is the significance of relationships, trust, recognition and respect in their education (Bottrell and Goodwin, 2011; Tuck 2011). Before delving too much further into the collection of students' experience, we pause to elaborate on the background of *Stepping Back In*.

*Stepping Back In* was developed in 2006 in *Merino Plains* (a pseudonym), a regional centre of the *Merriwa* (also a pseudonym) grain growing region, and a significant distance from the capital city of Victoria in Australia. *Merino Plains* is an important transport hub and service centre for a prosperous agricultural district. In common with many regional economies, the manufacturing sector of the district has declined markedly over the past two decades, resulting in high levels of unemployment and welfare dependency (Smyth and McInerney 2012, 29). *Stepping Back In* has an aim to provide more flexible learning opportunities for disengaged students and early school leavers. Students are enrolled in their local secondary school (*Merino Plains College*)

with the program itself operating separate from the school site in a rented house close to the centre of town. It is governed by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). The program caters for students aged between 11 and 18 with a motto that '*gives young people choices for the future*'. Each student is provided with an individual learning plan developed around their own needs and interests. The curriculum includes an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, work related studies and subjects intended to enable them to complete their secondary school certificates. Some students also enrol in further education accredited courses and participate in visual art, music, cooking, recreational activities and self-development sessions.

At the time of the interviews conducted in 2010, there were 58 students enrolled in *Stepping Back In*. We interviewed 24 of these students (8 males and 16 females), all of whom had volunteered as was the requirement of the institutional ethics process. By 2013, enrolments in this program had doubled in number (108 students) and the goal of the program had become more specifically aligned 'to re-engage students identified as being at high risk' (*Merino Plains College Profile 2013*, 6). This significant change in emphasis frames the student as the individual problem rather than the politics of schooling or broader social developments (te Riele 2008, 1; Zyngier 2011, 213).

The teachers at *Stepping Back In* had a commitment to the health and well-being of their students and connected them to their communities via work experience, local studies and volunteering programs. Counselling, health care and welfare support services were also made available as well as a specially designed program for young mothers and pregnant girls. A collection of 32 community partners, listed on the *Stepping Back In* website, include voluntary organisations, church groups, police,

pharmacies, scout groups, art galleries, libraries, community health, social security and community and government funded employment agencies.

*Merino Plains College*, the secondary school in which students from *Stepping Back In* are enrolled, has approximately 1100 students. It is the only government secondary education provider in a city of 18,000 people. About 30% of students receive the Education Maintenance Allowance or Austudy—both indicators of under privilege. According to the *Merino Plains College* website, the school ‘*provides a broad, balanced curriculum based on the pursuit of excellence and the principle of providing as many opportunities for success as possible to all its students*’. In 2010, each student was attracting \$6000 from the state government, resulting in an annual income of \$360,000 to the *Stepping Back In* program. This was used to cover staff salaries, rent of premises (\$200/week), maintenance of home and gardens and teaching resources. Initially the site and program were jointly funded and managed by DEECD *Riverian* (a pseudonym) region and *Merino Plains College* but during that same year, DEECD had transferred the responsibility and management of funding solely to the College. Early in 2013, The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority told the college that *Stepping Back In* premises could no longer run because the property did not meet building requirements. At the time of writing this article, *Merino Plains College* was working together with *Merino Plains City Council* and the property owners to try to fix the problem. The co-ordinator of the course also informed us during our interview with her that the site had been gazetted for future demolition. In the next section we elaborate on why the responsibility of funding programs like *Stepping Back In* are ‘devolved’, and why we think the students were ‘squeezed’ out of school in the first place.

### **The broader neoliberal trajectory: Failing school and labelled ‘at risk’.**

Neoliberal ideology, we argue, has become the dominating paradigm in education over



the past two decades, distorting and steering both social and educational practices and creating a *business as usual* ideology. This culture is inflexible because it is based on efficiency, accountability and standards, focusing on measurable outcomes and resulting in young people being treated as ‘human capital’ (Mills et al. 2013, 16) and subject to an ‘individualistic gaze’ (Gillies 2011, 195). This discourse obscures the wider social context and disproportionately excludes students of colour, low-income or those with special needs because of relatively minor incidents (Rustique-Forester 2005, 9).

The stories revealed by students and mentors from *Stepping Back In* point to very ‘different positions, perspectives and choices’ (Fielding and Moss 2011, 28) and expose a form of class-inequality. This is because the vast majority of students ‘lack not only the cultural and social capital of their middle class peers but are further disadvantaged by the discontinuous and disruptive nature of their schooling’ (Smyth and McNerney 2012, 76), and are consequently squeezed out because of policy designed to identify, stereotype and segregate them (Valencia 2010, 112). Once these young people are excluded from school, they also experience diminished citizenship rights and employment prospects within their own communities (Munford and Sanders 2011, 206; McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon 2013, 2) and their lives become ‘articulated and experienced as an individual project’ leaving them to ‘locate the answers to their difficulties and problems within themselves’ (Pless 2014, 238).

In the next section we explain how we engaged in voiced research to counter this situation by tracing students’ narratives as ‘political storylines’ (Pless 2014, 238).

### **Engaging in ‘voiced’ research.**

In the vein of Fine’s (1991) *Framing Dropouts*, we use ‘critical ethnographic slices’ (8) as a way of pursuing ‘critical storytelling’ by invoking Barone (1992) ‘to explore the connections between the pain of isolation, its attendant injustices, and the school as a

socio-political institution' (143). This is most dramatically exemplified in Barone's (1993) critical storied account of the life of Billy Charles Barnett, an Appalachian teenager deemed most likely to 'drop out' of school. Green (2002) notes, that 'the term "slice" [in ethnographic research] emphasises that, while depictions of...lives are only partial, they are not random or lacking coherence' (vii), they are a combination of who has done the 'looking', 'how it is cut and who [has done] the cutting' (vii), with the result that:

...the depictions reflect not only the perspectives of the subjects of the research but also the perspectives of the researchers and their particular interpretations of the research paradigm or methodology being used. What is presented can...be seen as snapshots...of research outcomes at a given time and place as selected by the viewer (vii).

Our argument of students being forced out of high school is 'a political story' (Fine 1991, 8). As Page (1994) put it in reviewing Fine's book, the story is one that reveals the 'rigged [nature of the] game' (479) in which 'a seemingly benign public institution' (Fine 1991, xi) makes the process of 'dropping out look like the students' choice' (479). In 'interrupt[ing] the prevailing discourse' (Fine 1991, xiii) that constructs 'dropping out' as if it were 'the failure of individuals' (Page 1994, 479), we are actively positioning ourselves in the pose of 'the artful writer-persuader' (Barone 1995) category, in which we are extremely mindful of 'the necessity of relinquishing control ... [and] allowing readers the freedom to interpret and evaluate from their unique vantage point' (67).

The source of the ethnographic slices reported upon here is a larger multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1998) across six sites that we have described elsewhere (Smyth and McNerney, 2012) as providing re-engagement programs for young people who had 'dropped out', been 'eased out' or 'propelled out' of mainstream schooling. The larger

ethnographic case record, along with the narrative portraits, has been published in a book length manuscript (Smyth and McInerney 2012) that provides considerably more detail than can be provided here, on each of the participant's stories. In this paper, therefore, we have used a theoretical positioning of what Arnot and Reay (2007) describe as 'a pedagogic voice' to 'engage with the power relations' (312) by splicing together strategically selected ethnographic fragments and re-assembling them to represent the larger story of educational re-engagement. As Leary (2007) put it, in ethnographic research when we select and re-mix, we re-make in a way in which the re-sutured pieces give a more complicated story than told by the sum of the parts (see for example, Marcus 2007), or that could have been told alone by the source from whence they were derived. As Leary (2007) confirms, what we are doing resembles the ancient rhetorical technique of 'compilatio'—'the process of collecting fragments from various sources and putting them together in a new whole' (97).

Fieldwork in the project, '*Re-engaging 'disadvantaged' young people with Learning*' of which *Stepping Back In* was a component, involved three phases: first, an extensive round of individual and small group interviews with the young people themselves; second, interviews with teachers and program managers who worked with these students; and third, interviews with adults who were considered to be 'significant others' because of the integrated and collective approach in assisting young people to 'improve their lot' (Smyth and McInerney 2012, 91-92). Significant others included a police youth officer, community health and youth workers and maternal and social welfare workers.

When interviewing participants, we used Burgess's (1988) non-standardized interview technique to develop conversations that allowed space for them to talk (144). Three questions were posed to the students to stimulate dialogue about their past,

present and future situations and experiences: *How did you come to be here in Stepping Back In? What is it like...and what are your plans for the future?* Each interview was of approximately 45 minutes in duration. Having constructed ‘narrative portraits’ for each young person from the ethnographic interview transcripts (see Smyth and McInerney, 2013 for a detailed discussion) we revisited their portraits for this paper according to the sequence of the interview questions, thereby seeking to achieve three things. Firstly, to reveal the history/background of these young people and opening a discussion of the reasons that led them to being removed from mainstream schooling in the first place. Secondly, to explain what was going on for them in the program and how this differed from their past experience of learning. Finally, we asked them to share their aspirations as they planned a future for themselves. This final section is particularly telling in that their stories of courage and determination in turning things around expose what *could* have prevented them from leaving school in the first place. The first time each participant is introduced in this paper their name is typeset in bold.

**Creating spaces for participants: *How did you get to be here at Stepping Back In?***

**Ben** begins his response to this question by explaining that leaving school for him was due to a complex combination of factors that included issues of class, power and history. He tells us that in primary school he had no friends:

*...so I went out of my way being silly trying to make them*

Ben had been expelled from *Merino Plains College* in his first year for being a ‘disturbing influence’ and he had little direction. He was on the verge of criminal activity and could well have ended in juvenile prison—a fate that had befallen his cousin:

*A lot of my friends from Merino Plains went into drugs and some got into vandalism and stuff. People try and give you advice but being a teenager you tend not to listen and then the police get involved and they start coming down on you and it doesn't feel very good.*

Ben experienced a home life with one parent, little or no income, inadequate housing and was surrounded by family and peers caught up in a cycle of violence, drug abuse and stealing. Tilleczek, et al. (2011, 28) confirms that accounts such as Ben's are non-linear and fragmented and often include the need to take on multiple adult roles whilst attempting to finish schooling (26). **William** at 15 years had already moved from place to place and school to school. His mother had tried home schooling him for a while at the last place, which, William tells us he loved, because of the wallabies and spring flowers. Nevertheless, he and his mother had to be escorted from there by police to *Merino Plains* [we assume due to a restraining order as a result of continued domestic violence]. William elaborates:

*School wasn't an option because I have ADHD and the kids used to pick on me and bully me. My teachers were very strict. I yawned once and got sent out of class. Mum is reasonably happy with me now but she's been busy lately and hasn't been paying much attention. I have been diagnosed with a depression disorder. I was on medication when I was younger but I used to get headaches. The tablets were supposed to calm me down but they didn't. I have a lot of anger. There are a few things that cause me to get out of control—my dad for one. He forgets my birthday every year. He hasn't been much of a father.*

**Erin**, a drug and alcohol counsellor at *Stepping Back In*, provided us with an overview of some of the social processes confronting young people like Ben and William in regional and rural communities like *Merino Plains*. She also pointed to some of the inadequacies of government policies and practices in dealing with the emotional and

social development of young people whose lives have been disrupted by both family and societal breakdown:

*Lots of kids come out of the college to Stepping Back In. It seems that if there is a little hiccup at school, the teachers just say 'you are Stepping Back In material'. The program is getting bigger and that brings problems. What I was doing was hard work because I'm supposed to be doing drug and alcohol counselling but I found myself doing so much other stuff as well. One of the kids said 'I'll have a baby and I'll get a house'. That really shocked me. She is homeless because her mum pushed her out the door. There are quite a few social problems around here. I've been working a lot with kids who haven't been to school since they were 13 years of age. Often it's to do with parents and family structure breakdowns. I was seeing as many as 60-70 kids a year which was much more than I could handle. My workload was supposed to be 12 kids but I was working with 20 at a time and I felt like I was just band aiding.*

Erin's dialogue confirms that her position is much more involved than simply being a counsellor in helping these young people. Nevertheless, her role is under-resourced, student numbers are growing and still the program is due to be closed down. Erin left her job at the college because she was exhausted and unsupported, and to complicate matters, felt that she was 'band aiding'. Her dialogue also demonstrates how many students enter programs like *Stepping Back In* because they are labelled as being 'at risk' (Margonis 1992, 344). **Albert**, an alcohol and drug worker for Red Cross in *Merino Plains* also tells us how vital care and support is for students like William and Ben:

*Kids like it here because they are listened to—they have a voice.*

In contrast, he states:

*High school teachers are often ill-equipped to deal with young people; they maintain an emotional distance from kid's lives.*

Albert has extensive knowledge about the social and emotional trauma experienced by William and Ben from working in an organization that had provided specialised home-based care placements. Albert elaborates on the importance of trust:

*In my experience, the reason why kids move out of the Secondary College comes from the Principal and the discipline policies. They wait till the kids' stuff up and then they have an option to kick them out. These kids have so many dramas in their lives that school is the last thing on their mind. Teachers at high school don't have time, the patience or the training to deal with kids who have grown up with so much violence that they will try anything. Teachers are very authoritarian and they don't like kids who cause them to become anxious. I asked a kid once what I had done for him while he was in care. He said "the one thing I loved was that you were always there and I could trust you although you pissed me off sometimes. You were that constant in my life. I was brutalised in my family and then judged for talking about it". A lot of kids don't get anything from their families. I don't know if teachers have time to develop those relationships or maybe they are scared of doing that stuff.*

From Albert's experience it seems likely that many teachers working in large public high schools like *Merino Plains* are unaware of the extent of mental, social and family dysfunction experienced by the young people and the impact these major traumatic experiences, explained by Albert, may have on their learning (Gillies 2011, 193). Albert also explains that discipline policies in the school are not helping and that teachers are often too busy with other matters to deal with relationships. Two close friends, **James** (16 years) and **Jasmine** (15 years), confirm Albert's insight:

*I felt lost in the crowd (James)*

*...they didn't get to know you and judged you straight away. When I began high school, I had a problem and they said, "don't bring it to school because it's not our problem". I was getting picked on. It was awful to go to school. I left and went to another high school but I was there for a couple of months when people started spreading rumours about me. I got a label and it stuck. It was like my last school but worse. I didn't have anyone to talk to or hang out with and I just didn't want to*

*go. In the beginning I was doing okay but I was not happy and it was affecting my work. When I didn't come to school I would stay at home and be lazy. (Jasmine)*

Jasmine and James reveal that school was an unwelcoming and bleak experience and that they could not find significant mentors who were prepared to listen or talk unconditionally to them. Jasmine also discloses how important it was for her to feel happy at school in order to be engaged in learning. **Michelle**, a police officer who visits Jasmine and James, elaborates further on the complexity of Jasmine and James situation and endorses Albert and Erin that student dis-engagement from schooling is not simply about motivation:

*Drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, break-down in family relationships, lack of parent supervision and disengagement from school. It is difficult to access any service for young people with the staffing cuts we have suffered. If you are in crisis there is nowhere to go. Young people have to go to Accident and Emergency departments in hospitals and wait. If you have a crisis you have no choice. There's a huge gap in mental health and drug dependency services. We do have homelessness but it's not as obvious as you would see in the capital city. You don't see bed rolls and things, but you do see kids couch surfing. My aim is to reduce youth crime by building relationships. (Michelle)*

**Kate**, the manager and main teacher in *Stepping Back In*, is responsible for curriculum planning, the preparation of individual learning plans, student counselling, parent engagement, staffing matters and the day-to-day running of the centre. Kate is therefore placed in a rather invidious position. As a member of the leadership team she is expected to support the ethos and directions of the *Merino Plains College* and yet is also well aware that some of the college practices and policies are part of the reason that students enter *Stepping Back In*:



*I never talk in any other terms except the future and sometimes I have to 'bite my tongue'. I'm like an undercover agent. I 'drip-feed' the principal information very carefully, especially regarding overcrowding and under-resourcing. (Kate)*

Kate was treading a cautious path in maintaining a separate program for the students whilst trying to also advocate a more equitable share of resources to support the ever-increasing numbers of students being sent into the program.

*In this place you are always helping kids so you don't feel down. I know I sound 'cold' but you can't allow yourself to think too much about the upsetting things.*

Michelle (the police officer), in cooperation with Kate, initiated a regional crime prevention program:

*I worked with the students for one session per week. The incentive was that if they attended regularly they got to go on camps ... so we organized adventure activities like caving, surfing, canoeing and horse riding. Really, it was all about enhancing relationships with police and the flow-on effect of keeping young people out of trouble with the law. The program was successful but after one year of funding it was no longer available, so I wasn't able to continue.*

In this section, Michelle, Kate and significant others have demonstrated their dedication, compassion and collegiality in working together in assisting young people gain credentials and life skills to improve their life chances, gain independence and find employment. The imminent termination of the program, however, is likely to deny them 'dignity as workers, of self-esteem, of the feeling of being useful and having a social place of their own' (Linhart cited in Bauman 2004, 13).

### **Pedagogical voices of the present: *What is it like here?***

In this section, we continue to provide a space in which young people who have been marginalized can 'prudently and cogently *speak back*' (Smyth, Down, McInerney and

Hattam 2014, 98) to ‘contemporary school reform’ (99). Jasmine begins:

*...compared to a mainstream school it's a lot easier to learn here. There are fewer students and the teachers can help you more if they see you struggling – It's more comfortable, I feel less grumpy and more confident.*

Zyngier (2011) indicates that to build positive relationships requires commitment from both parties (students and their mentors) in addition to ‘structural support that facilitates and encourages the time and opportunity for engagement’ (224). Jasmine has explained the significance of forming relationships (more accessible in smaller classrooms) in assisting her to re-engage and develop confidence in her own learning. Her friend James also confirms the importance of developing responsibility:

*Conflicts are dealt with in a more effective manner, and you need a good reason to leave classes early and you are expected to turn up. If you have a bad night you text in and tell them the problem, different to high school where we wouldn't go and wouldn't tell them. This makes you feel good about yourself.*

William indicates how important it is to feel welcomed and supported, in order to learn:

*...you can do things that interest you and not get bullied and the teachers are kinder and they are giving me choices of what I can do.*

In addition, Ben confirms the significance of reciprocal respect:

*I had to learn how to relate to people and show respect if I wanted respect back.*

The pedagogical voices (Arnot and Reay 2007) of these four students has engaged ‘with the power relations’ to ‘create new voices’ (312) that highlight the importance of choice, explicit expectations and freedom to pursue one’s own interests in developing responsibility in learning. At *Stepping Back In*, these students had experienced mentors and teachers who listened to them, and they learnt via role modelling how to deal with

conflicts. There was more communication and a safer supportive environment in which to solve problems. As a consequence, many of these young people experienced improved health, fitness, wellbeing and self-confidence. As Lucashenko (2010) explains, ‘these connections needn’t cost a fortune’ because:

...troubled kids need schools they can connect with and then jobs to go to — meaningful activity—just like adults do. And if their dysfunctional families fail them and institutions can’t take up the slack, kids need to be provided with a range of different connections to the wider society, avenues they can take into citizenship and belonging. Failing this, they are likely to drift into a downward spiral of grog, drugs, fights, crime. (282)

It has probably become obvious that we are implicitly advocating for democratic pedagogical changes to schooling of the kind argued for by Guajardo et al. (2008). These authors stress the importance of a transformative education based on positive cultural, social and institutional change to create trusting relationships, dignity, respect and nurturing. We argue, therefore, that it is important to recognise diversity among all young people and acknowledge and encourage a sense of competence and will to succeed. We also argue that learning can and should be relevant and engaging because it connects students to their schooling and provides them with a sense of ‘belonging’ (Kirshner and Pozzoboni 2011, 1655). We advocate for classrooms that are smaller, accommodating and supportive, so students feel safe to take intellectual risks and express opinions (Valencia 2010, 154) and are less likely to be excluded by teachers because their needs are being met (Rustique-Forrester 2005, 31). Finally, as will be revealed in the next section, co-operative problem solving is more likely to occur when problems are shared and common concerns discussed and practised through principles and values of justice, fairness and community. A collective approach that integrates the

social, economic and cultural resources of communities like *Merino Plains* is more likely to improve the lot of the most disenfranchised and marginalized.

### **Stepping into the future.**

Most of the young people we interviewed from *Stepping Back In* had a ‘deeply ingrained sense of failure associated with their years of schooling’ (Smyth and McInerney 2012, 31), yet when provided with a respectful environment for learning as outlined in the last section, they developed a sense of agency and a new-found belief in the relevance of education for the future. Munford and Sanders (2011, 206) argue that this sense of agency was made possible by moving from a focus on individual to collective responsibility, thereby drawing on individual strengths and capabilities as the social positioning and relations made with these young people. In other words, their public and private worlds ‘intersected’ in positive rather than negative ways:

*Things have changed for me. I don't even think about doing stupid things. Coming here has caused me to think more about my life and sense of responsibility. We talk about what we have been through which is a hell of a lot. We talk about day to day matters and if there is something wrong with our babies we talk about that. (Mia)*

William, formally suffering depression, abuse and anger issues, has developed enthusiasm for the visual arts and is taking up his interests in voluntary work, food preparation and fitness as a way of maintaining his health and developing self-confidence:

*Here I do gym, cooking and art. I also volunteer for the Salvation Army in the kitchen and we serve 100 people every week. I attend to the food and make the coffees. I love cooking. I sometimes cook at home and I've a tuna recipe that I made up myself. I'm a pretty good cook and my volunteering should help my resume. Since I've been going to the gym I have lost a lot of weight. Physical exercise helps me keep control of myself.*

Rita is more enthusiastic about literacy because she is provided with choice:

*They are telling me to slow down; I'm past year 12 level with my reading because I like mystery books.*

James and Jasmine are both interested in the food and catering industry and are learning together how to become more independent:

*The other day we were talking about moving out of home, and then they helped us put realistic numbers into how much it would cost us to move out. (James)*

Jasmine's health has also improved:

*I exercise and walk around everywhere and there is more social interaction.*

Ben too has developed a sense of improved health and wellbeing and has a mature and philosophical insight into the future:

*If I wasn't here I'd probably be drinking and into drugs. We got asked to do a garden and design thing for the new Merino Plains gardens that are going to be built. It is going to be good [sadly this did not come to pass for political reasons]. If I have kids I can tell them that I helped build and design that. Since coming here I have grown up a lot. I've been finding out what life is about. If you die it's over basically. If you go down one path it's for the rest of your life. I'm in control of myself now. After I've done my two years here I'm going to see if I can get an apprenticeship in Alliance City. My aim now is to finish a number of certificate courses and make a career out of cooking. I had to cook at the works expo. There is nothing better than a career you enjoy doing—one that can take you all the way around the world.*

Common aspirations and themes emerge in the stories of these young people who focus on a more positive present as they look into their future. They also reflect on past poor judgments and share a determination to break the cycle of unhealthy life choices and lifestyle patterns, possibly even breaking 'the churn within the precarious sector of the

labour market' (Furlong and Cartmel 2007, 35). Many experienced a sense of competency in work (both paid and voluntary) and made plans and goals within a safe learning environment that accommodated their differences. With improved confidence and wellbeing, these young people were in a position to develop and sustain a sense of responsibility as members of their own communities (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell and Rummens 2005, 74) and disrupt the spell of 'cumulative disadvantage and further socio-economic marginalization' (MacDonald 2009, 173).

## **Conclusion**

So are these young people really provided with '*success, opportunities and choices for the future*' when attending school? In this paper we have argued that an increasing number of young people are being pushed out of secondary schooling because of policy and practice that frames them as failures (Smyth et al. 2014, 61) and then places them at the 'brunt of precarious employment' that exacerbates their 'class-based' disadvantage (MacDonald 2009, 173).

Schools as agents of neoliberal capitalism construct young people, especially those from low socio-economic status or working class backgrounds, as non-motivated to learn. Political policy interventions, such as 'at risk policy', do not critically examine the social, political and economic conditions and consequent 'practices and procedures' (Gillies 2011, 195) dominating in schools. Therefore, these policies are 'unlikely to have a beneficial impact' on those they were designed for (Woodman and Wyn 2011, 23).

Throughout this paper we have re-inserted the interpretations and experiences of 9 of the 24 young people interviewed when attending a re-engagement program in Australia as an activist form of 'speaking back' to 'at risk' policy. We have also included the voices of five significant others who worked alongside them, to assist in

explaining the social and political reasons for students being separated in the first place. The students, who had grown up in ‘localities stripped of traditional employment routes’ (MacDonald 2009, 174), demonstrate that this was a policy that had disempowered them. Their collective voices, in contrast, have demonstrated the significance of developing respectful and supportive relationships and collegiate community approaches in learning, providing hope, courage and new spaces for alternative social relations.

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<sup>i</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for all schools, programs, students and their teachers throughout this paper.