One Size Fits Some: Moving From Mainstream to Alternative Schooling

Developed countries such as Australia are currently experiencing an era of neoliberal political agendas that result in an increasingly narrowed focus on schooling outcomes as measured by standardised testing regimes such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), leading to a pedagogical impoverishment where anxious teachers shift toward transmission pedagogies tightly orientated toward test items? (Thomson, Lingard, & Wrigley, 2011, p. 6). For example, in Australia, the federal government? s Education Revolution has seen the advent of a national curriculum and high-stakes testing regime in literacy and numeracy, along with an alarming trend towards media-constructed league tables and the supposed increased accountability of schools and schooling systems measured on particular indices derived from performance in the national testing regime. In such a homogenising educational-political context it becomes important to recognise the rich learning opportunities that are made available to students in alternative schooling models.

Connell (1993) claims that the very concept of mainstream schooling must be called into question, as it suggests reasoned consensus. What we are dealing with, rather, is a socially dominant or hegemonic curriculum? (p. 25). As Reimer and Cash (2003) explain, alternative schooling opportunities are required to accommodate the educational needs of students because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve their needs? (p. 11).

In this study, the rich lived experiences of students and teachers working at one alternative schooling site were documented over the period of a year. The Music Industry College (MIC) is an alternative school with a central focus on preparing students for a career in the music industry. While the school works with
state-mandated curriculum, assessment and reporting requirements for accreditation purposes, they are able to work within and against the grain of policy simultaneously? (Thomson, et al., 2011, p. 4) in order to serve the particular interests and learning needs of students.

Method

Data were collected over the period of a year in the form of survey instruments and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers at MIC using Seidman’s (2006) interview series. These data were then (re)storied using a narrative inquiry approach borrowing from arts-based education research (Barone, 2007; Barone & Eisner, 2006), feminist poststructuralism (Davies, 1994; St. Pierre, 2000) and narrative research in education (Barone, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gallagher, 2011; Holley & Colyar, 2009; Riessman, 2008) that (re)tells and (re)presents stories as lived experience, shared through language and voice, where attention to subjectivity, power and discourse require particular kinds of wakefulness? (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 21) in order to act as a methodological ?release point? to invite the unsaid, the masked, the contested, the contradictory? (Gallagher, 2011, p. 51).

Expected Outcomes

There were three major themes arising from the narratives generated for this study. These included: community and culture; curriculum connectedness; and commitment. A strong sense of community exists at MIC that is due in large part to the buy-in of students and teachers to the rich culture of the school that goes beyond the four walls of the classroom and the standard school day. A number of co-curricular experiences are made available to students that involve large scale participation and involvement of the school community. Through carefully considered planning and implementation of engaging and real-life learning experiences, students at MIC enjoy a curriculum that is connected to their life worlds and interests. Finally, a high level of investment into the commitment to schooling is apparent at MIC from both teachers and students, a commitment seldom found in mainstream schooling. An overwhelming sense of investment in the school is apparent through the shared narratives of teachers and students at MIC.

References


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