An argument for new understandings and explanations of early school leaving that go beyond the conventional

John Smyth*

Texas State University – San Marcos; University of Ballarat; Charles Darwin University; Flinders University; University of Waikato; Massey University

This paper presents an argument around the need to rethink the issue of early school leaving from the vantage point of students and teachers, and the conditions and pathways that need to be constructed and brought into existence within schooling, if such conditions do not already exist. The attempt is to move discussions outside of the well-meaning but ultimately unhelpful literatures of 'at risk' categories that end up blaming students, their families or backgrounds. The claim being advanced is that the focus needs to be on relationships, school cultures, and pedagogical arrangements that make schools more attractive and educationally engaging places.

Introduction

> To think deeply in our culture is to grow angry, and to anger others; and if you cannot tolerate this anger, you are wasting your time thinking deeply. One of the rewards of deep thought is the hot glow of anger at discovering a wrong, but if anger is a taboo, thought will starve itself to death. (Jules Henry, 1963, p. 128)

The purpose of this paper is to explore some theoretical vantage points that might better explain why so many young people have unsatisfying and unrewarding experiences of schooling, particularly at high school, to the extent that many of them are making the active decision to leave school by 'dropping out'. I am particularly keen to avoid perspectives that portray young people by labeling them as being 'at risk', thereby implying that they or their families, cultures, backgrounds or general circumstances are deficient and thereby responsible for their failure to complete school. Like Ball (1997) in his argument for the pursuit of more sophisticated

*School of Education, Flinders University of South Australia, PO Box 2100, Adelaide 2001, Australia. Email John.Smyth@flinders.edu.au

explanations of school reform, I want to start out by confessing to feeling a certain degree of incompleteness in this paper, and to position this paper as by no means ' a finished piece' (p. 317). In large part this is not because of any lack of energy on my part, but rather to acknowledge the inherent complexity of what is going on. What might appear on the surface to be a commonsense set of explanations about why young people leave school early, needs a serious rethink and that may take some time.

The issues are complex and they deserve a more sophisticated treatment than they are currently receiving at the moment. I acknowledge that some of the ideas I wish to explore may not appear to be especially new, but the fact that victim blaming approaches persist is evidence that they are proving more difficult to dislodge than many of us thought.

In advancing on the limited and partial explanations that I find so troublesome at the moment as to why young people choose to leave school early, I want to pursue some alternative exploratory categories with which to sharpen our thinking and analysis. This is important because as educational researchers we need better ways in which to:

- explore how some schools find ways of understanding the lives of young adolescents typically referred to as being 'at risk' of school failure;
- identify the barriers, interferences and impediments to satisfying learning experiences for young adolescents; and
- highlight ways of organizing schooling that work for young adolescents, particularly those different from the prevailing middle class ethos of schooling.

In other words, we need to understand the constellation of supportive conditions that make it possible for students experiencing the greatest difficulties, to experience schooling as a hospitable experience and as a consequence be able to stay on and complete their schooling. However, questions of this order of magnitude are not ones that can be quickly resolved in a single paper like this, and my intention is to begin the debate and to open up the issues to wider scrutiny and analysis rather than to resolve anything.

The status of this paper is not one that reports on any 'data', nor is it a paper that makes any claims to analyse or present evidence—that would be a monumental task given the plethora of literature around what is euphemistically referred to as 'dropping out' of school. Rather, my intent is argumentative and more contradictory; it is at the same time modest, but also expansive. I want to engage in what Lather (1986) calls 'dialectical theory building', which is a precursor to being able to eventually construct data in context as a way of both clarifying and reconstructing existing theory, around the issue of early school leaving. As I have put it elsewhere, when we do this:

> … the efficacy of existing theories is challenged as they are subjected to the interrogation of generative themes unearthed from the everyday experiences of those whose lives are being investigated. What is being attempted is the continual modification of the existing theoretical constructs to reveal 'counter interpretations' (Lather, 1986, p. 267) through a more intimate understanding of the views of participants. At the same time, sedimented

> layers of meaning and understanding are being uncovered about the complexities of the lives contained in the interview conversations. (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 28)

Getting oriented theoretically in this way provides an orientation with which to research the issues in light of any fieldwork experience. In order to advance current understandings of why students exit school prematurely, we need explanations that:

- go beyond conventional or surface explanations;
- engage in a critical conversation with the wider sets of social and economic arrangements in which the 'problem' is embedded;
- puncture the often falsely presented picture of normality of some students succeeding at school, and not for others, and to instead enable a 'different reality' (Mac an Ghaill, 1993) to be constructed; and
- are not constrained by existing language, literatures or categories.

To step aside slightly for a moment. These may appear to be a somewhat demanding set of aspirations that could be difficult to met in an exploratory paper like this. Notwithstanding the magnitude of the task, we ought not to be daunted or overwhelmed by the need to unsettle current explanations about why young people leave school. The position I shall adopt in this paper is akin to what Allman (1999) referred to as having a 'social imagination' (p. 9). I take this to mean having the courage to attempt 'to create a more humanized form of existence' (p. 9), but there are always caveats in any serious attempts at reconstrual, and I want to confess to agreeing with Allman (1999) that:

> Any vision worth striving for must be realistic rather than whimsical. … In other words, to be achievable, a vision must derive from the real, the material world (Allman, 1999, p. 9)

To put this in its sharpest form, unless we are prepared to treat the world critically in the sense that I am seeking to do here with the category of early school leaving, then we are contributing to the perpetuation of an impoverished set of social relations. More to the point, if we allow explanations of early school leaving to continue to reside in conventional victim blaming at risk explanations, then we will have abdicated a crucial responsibility—to hear from young people why large numbers of them find schooling to be inhospitable, alienating and untenable. As researchers we need the intellectual and moral courage to 'trouble' extant interpretations, where troubling means:

> To complicate knowledge, to make knowledge problematic. This does not mean to reject knowledge. Rather it means to work *paradoxically* with knowledge, that is, to simultaneously use knowledge to see what different insights, identities, practices and changes it makes possible while critically examining that knowledge (and how it came to be known) to see what insights and the like it closes off. (Kumashiro, 2004, pp. 8–9, emphases in original)

The kind of unsettlement I am trying to achieve in this paper is of a kind that Kumashiro (2004) refers to as 'knowledge that is disruptive, discomforting, and problematizing'. What is comforting, he says:

> … at least at a subconscious level, is a repetition of familiar, doable, commonsensical practices, not disruption and change. (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 9)

So, while my aspirations here might seem grand, it is because they probably are, and they need to be. To be less than that is to end up being whimsical or even worse, to be complicit in continuing to construct a false and diminished picture. Lensmire (1998) alerted us to the magnitude of what is involved here when he said of the US (and it is not that different in other Western countries):

> Student voices have not fared well in American schools … they have too often been reduced to lifeless, guarded responses—responses to the questions and assignments of powerful others, responses formed in the shadow of teacher scrutiny and evaluation. (Lensmire, 1998, p. 261)

An Alternative Way of Portraying School 'Dropouts'

The educational literature around students who leave school before completion of what many people regard as the benchmark of 12 years of schooling, is as formidable in its size, range and complexity, as it is in the geographic location from which it is written from/about. When we speak of young people 'at risk' of underachieving, or in the worst case, of not completing schooling, there can be a bewildering list of factors/indicators of varying degrees of relevance and credibility. Bessant (2002) has usefully summarised this mix as generally comprising:

> … low literacy skills, low socio-economic status, minimal parental education levels, geographic status (rural young people are at greatest risk), ethnicity, NESB and Aboriginality, low self-esteem, high self-esteem, unruly behaviour and behavioural problems (i.e., disruptive behaviour, attention seeking, temper tantrums, use of offensive language, inability to accept criticisms, refusal to take responsibility for one's own behaviour), lack of motivation, isolation, sexuality, ill-health and disability, teacher dominated teaching, gender-based harassment, restrictive curriculum choices, menstruation, pregnancy, gender, passivity, truancy, withdrawal, stress, tattoos, drug use, developmental difficulties, family structure (reconstituted, 'fragmented' family structures), family conflict/tensions, cultural conflict, abuse/neglect, unsupervised recreation, mobility, poor role models, alcohol use by parents and the culture of the schooling system (i.e., rigidity of rules, uniforms, punctuality, disciplinary policy, authoritarianism of many teachers). (Bessant, 2002, p. 35)

While there is not the space here to go into the argument around the 'politics of who's at risk' (see Fine, 1995), what can be said is that labeling of this kind is a contentious issue that is the consequence of a process of social construction rather than a disinterested given; it is the result of the operation of what is constructed as being 'normal' and, therefore, what is considered appropriate to label as aberrant or deviant—and the at risk category is a prime instance of this. The problem with allowing some groups to be categorised 'at risk' is that it places the focus on the individual, personal, familial and cultural deficits, while deflecting the focus way from the larger social and political forces that led to the situation in the first place. To use a simple example; the difference is between describing an individual as being 'disadvantaged' in contrast to being 'put at a disadvantage'. In the former, the individual is

constructed as the victim, while in the latter the causation lies much more widely in the set of social forces that have worked on the individual to 'put' them in that state of affairs in the first place.

When students provide explanations for their complex reasons for leaving school (see Smyth *et al.*, 2000; Smyth & Hattam, 2002; Hattam & Smyth, 2003; Smyth, 2003; Smyth *et al.*, 2003), their decisions are made consciously and often amount to the perceived cultural irrelevance of the school and an absence of respect by the school for the lives, experiences and aspirations of young people. Such limitations of schooling are not an especially novel revelation, but the fact that educational contexts like this stubbornly persist, is indicative of a need for some serious rethinking. As Delgado-Gaitan (1988) notes:

> … the decision to leave school is not a whimsical act. 'It doesn't start in high school', claims a teacher [speaking of her own child]. It starts the day you begin school. … The fact that there is nothing in the classroom that the child can relate with … the very fact that everything is geared towards the mainstream culture, an intolerant system, a different pace than students can deal with … she drops out because she finds schoolwork irrelevant. … After [she] got tired of challenging these teachers for so many years and getting no respect, all it took was an emotional upset to break the camel's back. (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988, pp. 362–363)

At the heart of decisions to leave school lie students' 'profound boredom', a 'rejection of assigned school tasks', a school culture that does not invite students to share their social and emotional problems, and an atmosphere that is generally not conducive to 'establishing strong positive relationships with peers' (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988, p. 364). Added to the pressures of a dull, indifferent, boring curriculum and a failure to adequately understand and support young lives, is a competitive academic curriculum and an inflexible pace of learning, that often results in unbearable strains for young people who have already in many cases experienced repeated failure. These are not artifacts of personal preferences on the part of students, although young people have clear ideas regarding the conditions that support their learning; rather, they are indications of system pathology and a structured inability of schools and education systems to think deeply and systematically about embracing young lives.

In contradistinction to these circumstances, when students stay in school 'against the odds', it is often because they have found ways of dealing with 'the academic demands, the social pressures, and the conflicts with school personnel' (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988, p. 371), in contexts where schools, families and communities have found ways of understanding the issues and providing consistent support. More importantly, in these circumstances, it seems that schools in concert with families and communities, have created viable ways of reconfiguring and reinterpreting themselves so as to ensure that students don't become exiles from schools. It is about focusing on 'hope' rather than 'despair' (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

To turn around the situation of increasingly large numbers of young people choosing to walk away from schooling, will require analyses that begin from a radically different starting point. It is becoming clear from the widespread current attempts worldwide to impose 'reforms' on schools from the 'outside' (most notably muscular

forms of accountability, testing, standards and zero tolerance approaches), that this way is not working. Far from 'fixing' the problem it seems likely that they have become part of the problem, exacerbating and accelerating tendencies like that of dropping out of school. Currently, in most Western countries somewhere around 30 to 40% of young people are not completing high school, and the percentage is even more alarming for sub-groups whose backgrounds don't fit with the middle class orientation of most schools. Even among those who remain at school the question of 'relevance' looms large, with US estimates that:

> … the number of disengaged students may exceed two thirds of the high school population. (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, p. 106)

The starting point for this rethinking has to be around a reworking of relationships in schooling, for as Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) put it in the title of their recent book, there is *No Education Without Relation*. Margonis (2004) argues that we need to move from a position of 'student resistance' towards one of 'educative engagement', and this means going beyond the face-to-face dynamics in the classroom and focusing on the ways 'those patterns are pre-shaped by the institutional positions of students and teachers' (p. 47). He says:

> We cannot understand the ontology of social relationships without also considering the institutional influences that frame these relationships. (Margonis, 2004, p. 47)

Elsewhere I draw on the work of Fred Erickson to help explain what is happening in instances like this:

> Rather than regarding 'success' and 'failure' at school as residing exclusively in the 'internal traits' of students labelled as 'unmotivated' (Erickson, 1987, p. 337), what we need instead is to regard what is happening as residing in 'invisible cultural differences' (p. 337); that is to say, motivation and achievement (and by implication school retention/completion) are a 'political process' (p. 341) in which young people are making active 'existential choices' and decisions about whether they are prepared to 'trust in the legitimacy of the authority and the good intentions of [the school]' (p. 344). In other words, whether schools succeed in 'retaining' young people depends on how effective the school and its community is in persuading young people that compliance will indeed advance their interests in the short and long term. When we frame the issue in this way, the imperative becomes one of how schools and the wider community collaborate successfully to create the circumstances of trust that can work against the withdrawal of assent by increasing numbers of young people. (Smyth & Down, 2004, pp. 59–60)

Bringing about the substantial level of change necessary for schools to turn around early school leaving will require detailed understandings of what is happening when young people choose to terminate their formal schooling, and what is happening within the processes by which schools and communities reinvent themselves in doing something about the problem. That these issues require further urgent investigation has been extensively acknowledged (Kelly & Gaskell, 1996; Dei *et al.*, 1997; Phelan *et al.*, 1998; Smyth & Hattam, 2004), and there is a mounting international pressure to act on them (see Willms, 2003; National Research Council, 2004).

At the centre of my argument then, is the claim that if we can envisage the issue of students not completing (or 'dropping out' of) school, as residing in the institutional

relationships in which teachers are forced to 'act out their structurally slotted role' of dispensing (in many cases, especially for disadvantaged students) 'controlling pedagogies', then we end up producing situations in which 'students expect school to be disconnected from their lives'(Margonis, 2004, p. 48). The challenge for schools becomes one of 'changing the signals' (p. 48) being conveyed to students. Educational anthropologists in the way they analyse things are helpful here. Erickson (1987), Ogbu (1982) and Levinson (1992) argue that when young people withdraw (or even disengage) from schooling, then they are resisting or withdrawing their 'assent' (Erickson, 1987, pp. 343–344). According to Erickson (1987), when we say students are 'not learning', and by implication when students choose to separate themselves from schooling, what we mean is that they are:

> … 'not learning' what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as a result of intentional instruction. Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance. (Erickson, 1987, pp. 343–344)

While the situation is not exclusively one pertaining to students from poor and working class backgrounds, these students appear disproportionately in the statistics of students who fail to complete schooling—in my Australian study (Smyth *et al.*, 2000) around 80% of the 209 students interviewed came from situations of disadvantage. The official and often ham-fisted response has two elements to it; first, to raise the school leaving age which effectively further imprisons already alienated young people; and second, to impose a 'curriculum that is increasingly scripted and externally controlled' (Romano & Glascock, 2002, p. xiii). In this latter instance, what is created is an 'atomized curriculum … of drill sheets, rote learning, fragmented memorization, [and] functional comprehension' (pp. xvi–xvii) in which 'if students do not physically opt out of school, they close down mentally' (p. xiv).

However, if we approach the issue of early school leaving in ways that attempt to try and interrupt or at least significantly alter students' decision trajectories through 'engaging pedagogies' (McFadden & Munns, 2002), in which young people are saying, in effect, 'school is for us!' (Munns *et al.*, 2002), then we will have begun to get inside the ways in which students display 'an emotional attachment and commitment to [formal] education' (Munns *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). In Levinson's (1992) terms, when this occurs schools are in effect creating 'culturally appropriate activity settings' (p. 213) that are more closely tuned into the complexities of what is going on inside young lives. Romano and Glasnock (2002) could not have put it any more clearly when they said both students and the community need to engage with real-life issues:

> Get out of the classroom, eliminate drill and practice, respect the intelligence of students you work with, and recognize that the world is the learning environment, not the four walls of the classroom. (Romano & Glascock, 2002, p. xv)

Or as Ladson-Billings (2004) put it, searching for:

> … the ways that student's everyday experiences can be recruited as the basis for curriculum transformation. (Ladson-Billings, 2004, p. xiv)

Moving beyond a 'domesticating education' (Romano & Glascock, 2002, p. 9) and creating the circumstances of what Finn (1999) labels 'literacy with an attitude', requires that as educators and researchers we think about the creation of 'geographies of trust' (Scott, 1999). Trust is coming to be seen as one of the most vital elements in the extent to which young people are prepared to acknowledge and affirm the 'institutional legitimacy of the school' (Erickson, 1987, p. 345). We have yet to fully understand how it is that *some schools* secure the trust of young people in ways that turn around early school leaving. In order to do that we need to understand the contours of practice that support teachers and the relationships to the wider school community (Osterman, 2000) that effectively amount to ways of ensuring that students *want to* stay in schools.

Implications for Research

The starting point for any serious renovation and advancement of our understanding about what is happening within the complex issue of early school leaving, and the conditions necessary to try to correct it, has to be located within the experiences of those closest to it. We can no longer continue to be spectators of this issue from the outside. As educators and researchers, we need to find ways of giving students (and teachers who are strong advocates of student-centred approaches to change), a greater say.

Attending to the voices of students on schooling and school reform, and as an approach to educational research, is still relatively new (see for example the themed issue 'Learning from student voices', *Theory into Practice*, April 1995 and for UK work by Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Bragg, 2003; Fielding, 2001, 2004). Shultz and Cook-Sather (2001) note that:

> Published materials that address young people's perspectives are scarce. … For almost ten years, the absence of students' perspectives on school and school reform has been noted by critics. (Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001, p. 5)

That we should continue to be surprised about the extent of silencing of student voices on schooling, is indicative of the widespread and entrenched view that students are neither mature enough nor reliable enough witnesses to have a credible viewpoint on schooling (McQuillan, 1997). But, the view that students should continue to occupy an institutional position of subservience and compliance within schooling, is rapidly becoming unravelled in circumstances where young people are no longer prepared to be sidelined.

In many respects, it is not hard to see why the voices of those who have been 'exiled' or who have actively removed themselves from the school setting, are not likely to be gleefully embraced by those in positions of authority; that would be to concede that 'troublemakers' may actually have a point. But neither is it solely the case that when given the opportunity, all students will act to radically overthrow the status quo within schools, for as O'Loughlin (1995) notes, we cannot treat students or what they might say, homogeneously:

> [We] must resist the temptation to glamorize student voice, and recognize that the multiple voices students bring to the classroom, while potentially possessing some elements of resistance and transformation, are likely to be deeply imbued with status quo values. (O'Loughlin, 1995, p. 112)

Taking heed of these points, elsewhere I have summarised the possibilities in this way:

> Voiced research starts out from the position that interesting things can be said by and garnered from groups who do not necessarily occupy the high moral, theoretical or epistemological ground—they actually may be quite lowly and situated at some distance from the centers of power. (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 24)

And, in the specific case of those young people most at the margins, it can be argued that they do indeed have a unique perspective that deserves to be listened to, although the reality is that their viewpoint is frequently a disparaged one.

> Critical perspectives on social institutions are often best obtained from exiles, that is, persons who leave those institutions. This is perhaps why exiles' views are frequently disparaged as deviant and in some cases conspicuously silenced. (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 257)

The challenge in these circumstances for us as researchers and educators, as Weis and Fine (1993) put it, is one of inviting:

> … the voices of children and adolescents who have been expelled from the centers of their schools and the centers of our culture to speak. (Weis & Fine, 1993, p. 2)

The key identifying feature of a voiced approach to research (Smyth & Hattam, 2001) is that it elevates the perspectives of those whose views are rarely heard or that are drowned out by those who are louder or more dominant. In particular, there is:

- a more democratic approach in the way the research is undertaken;
- space is created in which the informants feel their perspective is genuinely being listened to;
- a move away from 'scripted' interviews, to 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1988);
- the everyday lives of informants are treated respectfully in the sense that they are considered to be important; and
- a preparedness to refocus the research around what is revealed as being important to the informants.

What I am arguing for in trying to better understand the multiple complexities of young lives, is that we 'trace the contours' (Bhavani, 1991) of how some schools and communities are able to produce conditions that permit and foster young adolescents to flourish in their learning. Such a view obviously involves moving considerably beyond what might be regarded as the current detached 'helicopter view of the educational landscape' (Brierley, 2001, p. 4) that hovers above the alleged 'problem', to one that listens to the 'peripheral voices' (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) and of 'narratives of social disruption' (Macmillan, 2002, p. 29).
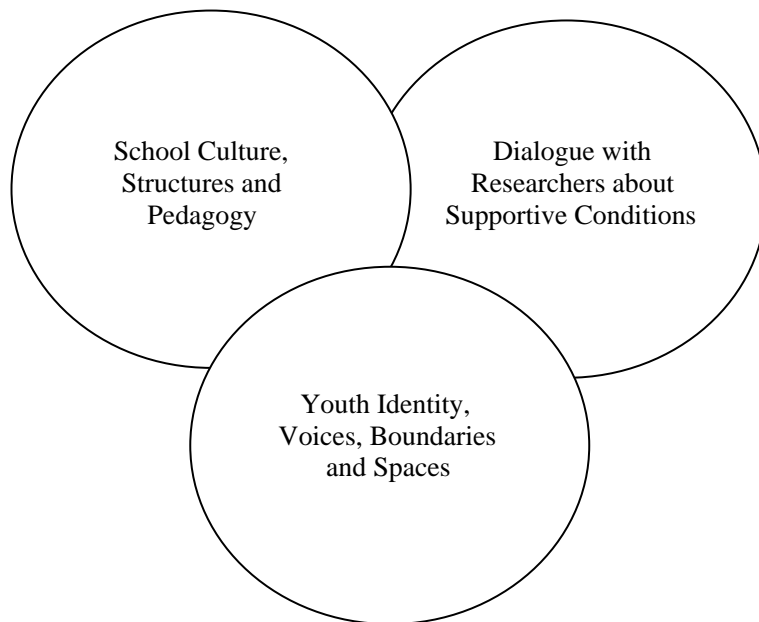
Figure 1. A heuristic for examining the complexity of early school leaving

The guiding research question that needs to be pursued and interrogated in respect of school culture, structures, pedagogies and the community/family/peer relationships and identity formation processes, is: what does it mean to be a young adolescent in school, and how and in what ways are supportive conditions leading to a successful schooling experienced being negotiated?

Diagramatically we can summarise it as in figure 1 above.

It should be clear by now that what I am arguing for is the development of a new way of looking at an enduring 'problem', one that seeks to go beyond simplistic explanations that in effect say, some young people leave school 'because they don't like it'. On the surface it might appear like that, but more robust explanations lie in areas like: the complex and multiple aspects of youth identity formation sometimes referred to as 'becoming somebody' (Wexler, 1992; Hattam & Smyth, 2003); students' sense of self in contexts other than schools (Edwards, 1999); and the potentially damaging and negative impact of the educational policy climate (Smyth, 2003b).

In Spindler and Spindler's (1998) terms, this means investigating, examining and analysing how 'boundaries and borders are negotiated, crossed, avoided or crashed into' (p. vii) within the conditions of schooling for young adolescents. Through the lives and experiences of students and teachers, we need to pay more regard to the wider circumstances of: (a) the cultures/structures/pedagogy of the school; (b) dialogue around the supportive conditions and pathways that exist or are brougnt into existence, and how barriers and interferences are negotiated; and (c) the navigation of youth identity, boundaries and spaces.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, while there is a need to step out somewhat in terms of a new set of arguments about the turmoil surrounding many young people who prematurely exit school, there is also a sense in which we still need to do the hard intellectual work in terms of posing the right sorts of questions, and ones that include young people in this framing. Notwithstanding, the kind of questions that seem to me to be crucial in this, are of a kind that ask:

- What is it like being a student or a teacher in this school?
- How is the school helping students to develop long term viable pathways for themselves?
- How is the nature of relationships being changed in the school?
- To what extent does the school appear to be succeeding in turning around the level of student engagement with learning?
- How are the school culture, structures and pedagogies helping or hindering in the project of students completing schooling?
- How is the school investing ownership of learning in students?
- Where is the school realistically at in the broader project of young people 'becoming somebody' (Wexler, 1992)?

The kind of theoretical vantage point I have been arguing for and that needs to be adopted is one that regards learning as a political process, in the sense of providing an authentic space for hearing the voices in schools that are not always accorded a particularly high priority (see also: Mitra, 2001, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002). Regarding schools as having a major role as active agents in the construction of life chances for young people is a considerable advance on constructions of victim blaming and 'at risk' labelling that produces responses by young people that amount to 'doing school' (Pope, 2001). The deepening sense of alienation and disaffection being experienced by many young adolescents in schools can only be turned around if, in the words of Sizer and Sizer (1999), we openly acknowledge that 'The Students Are Watching'. That is to say, students need to be construed as credible witnesses of how school is helping (or hindering) them in the project of constructing a satisfying and worthwhile life. The challenge is one where:

> The students watch us, all the time. We must honestly ponder what they see, and what we want them to learn from it. (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. 121)

What I have attempted here is to present an orientation that might open the door to a different way of approaching the issue, a new way of framing it, and some thoughts about some of the elements that might need to be in a reworked constellation.

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Notes on contributors

John Smyth holds the Roy F. and Joann Cole Mitte Endowed Chair in School Improvement, Texas State University-San Marcos. He is also Emeritus Professor, Flinders University; Professorial Fellow, University of Ballarat; Visiting Professor, Waikato University; and Adjunct Professor, Charles Darwin University. He publishes widely in the area of the impact of educational policy on teachers and students. His latest book (with Hattam and others) is *'Dropping Out', Drifting Off, Being Excluded: becoming somebody without school.*

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