(Re) Conceptualising Student Engagement as doing education … not doing time.

Abstract

The challenge of student engagement has been recognised as a serious issue, especially in the middle years of schooling in Australian education. This qualitative study seeks to understand the experiences of one group of students beginning their high school years. Students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement and are traditionally objectified and omitted from this dialogue as they are often configured as the products of formal education systems. Giving voice to students, I compare and contrast the various and sometimes contesting understandings of what an authentic or generative student engagement might mean for both classroom practice suggesting that pedagogical reciprocity that connects to the real life (CORE Pedagogy) of the students is a too often ignored but necessary element of teacher pedagogy for all students, but in particular for those from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds. I identify and examine three contesting epistemological constructions of student engagement in order to answer three interrelated questions; (i) whose conception of engagement is most worthwhile; (ii) what are the purposes of engagement and (iii) who benefits (and who is excluded) from these purposes. I conclude that not all forms of student engagement are equally worthwhile.

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**Introduction**

Engagement is difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing. (Newmann, 1986) This paper elaborates previous work (Zyngier, 2004b) that examined contemporary research and debates about pedagogies and understandings of student engagement. This paper presents part of research that analyses the changing pedagogical practices of a group of teachers in one school through the voices of teachers and students. Informed by Haberman's *Pedagogy of Poverty* (1991), hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) and *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), and Shor's *Empowering Pedagogies* (1987, 1992, 1996), I suggest that resistance is not the antithesis of engagement, but a complimentary act of resistance, while student accommodation or what Schlechty (2002) refers to as ritualistic or passive engagement is a self-protective negative agency in response to unequal power relations. A key consideration of the previous paper was ‘whether engagement is a key centralising factor in the successful implementation of empowering classroom pedagogies’ (McFadden and Munns, 2002, 359). Three contesting constructions of student engagement previously identified (Zyngier, 2004b) are examined in this paper through the (often but not necessarily) contesting and resisting voices of teachers and students. In conclusion, I ask how might we (re)conceive student engagement in order to achieve the twin goals of social justice and academic achievement (Butler-Kisber and Portelli, 2003) through an empowering and resistant pedagogy.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, there is significant interest and concern within Victoria as well as in other Australian states, with student retention, participation and achievement rates in post compulsory schooling. By way of response, governments and schools have developed many programs which aim to improve students' engagement with learning and improve educational outcomes for all students but in particular those identified as ‘at-risk of disengagement’ from schooling, and education and training more broadly. These aims reflect the then Victorian Minister of Education’s commitment to:

Develop[ing] innovative programs ... [that] will drive the required systemic changes that will allow schools to improve retention rates, lift achievement levels, and actively engage all students in
... [T]his new program for students in Years 7 to 10 ... is aimed at ... keeping all Victorian students engaged and stimulated at school. (Access, Innovation and Excellence: State Budget 2002)

Curriculum that is relevant to the needs and interests of students is important (Zyngier and Gale, 2003). But it also matters what teachers do with respect to students' learning. In particular, the research of Newmann and Associates (1996, 2001) and Lingard, et al (2001) suggests that certain pedagogies (that include engaging with difference and connectedness) can have positive effects on students' engagement with learning, including students who are at risk of academic failure.

**The Keymakers Project**

In response to both the initiatives of the Department of Education and the reconceptualisation of pedagogy, one school, Beachside Secondary College (BSC) in 2004 became part of what I have termed *The Keymakers* research, which explored the notion that active and authentic engagement of all students, but in particular those most at risk, can be achieved through enhancing the pedagogical practices of teachers. This research focused on the impact that teachers as 'keymakers' can have on both other teachers and their students, addressing issues of student (dis)engagement through the support of small teams of teachers in one disadvantaged secondary school's first year level (seven), through focussed action research on teaching practice.

**Methodology**

This research built on whole school programs already delivering improved participation in the middle years and effective transition to the later years at Beachside Secondary College.

The Year 7 teachers were a voluntary group prepared to alter their pedagogical practices. After investigation into the current teaching and learning with particular emphasis on the Essential Learning Framework from Tasmania and the Productive Pedagogies from Queensland, the teachers developed an integrated studies approach that crossed the traditional boundaries of the core curriculum. Together with various
organisational/structural changes there was a considerable emphasis on staff sharing ideas and expertise with the goal of developing units of work that could be used by all. In a school where most staffrooms are faculty based, these staff moved into one shared workroom. The timetable across the whole school changed into 100-minute blocks, a radical shift from the traditional 6 periods per day of 48 minutes duration. The six Year 7 classes each had responsibility for their own homeroom, where almost all their lessons occurred.

Over a period of one school year, I worked with Year 7 staff and the School Leadership Team in researching pedagogies that engage students across a range of learning areas. Individual interviews with the teachers documented those pedagogical actions that engaged students from the perspectives of the students and as indicated in the literature. Semi-structured interviews with the Year 7 teachers about the effects that their pedagogies may have on issues like student resistance, empowerment and engagement were conducted in private in Term One. Small focus group interviews of between 3-5 representative students from each class selected took place in Terms 2 and 3. The students were asked to reflect on the class teaching and the students reactions to their teacher. Engagement and aspiration levels of students were monitored through these focus group interviews together with a teacher workshops in the latter part of 2004 (Zyngier and May, 2004). The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed using N*Vivo qualitative analysis software.

The school was most helpful in providing access to staff and students as required. I recognize how busy schools and teachers are and how crowded the curriculum is and this paper certainly does not imply any criticism of teachers.

The school and its community

The kids come from the 7th lowest [Like School Group] demographic in the state as a generalisation, which is not to say that there aren't kids that come from families that live on farmlets and ride horses and do horse competitions as some sort of symbol of greater affluence. We take a mix of kids from the local area, ... the school has been innovative for a long time, but not very good at making sure people recognise and realise the innovation that was in the school ... I guess if I was trying to capture the kids, and especially when I got here, I felt that they had an enormous chip on their
shoulders, the great excuse was that we are pov\textsuperscript{vi} and we can't expect much. (Darren - Principal)

Beachside Secondary College is a public (government) school of some 800 students from Year 7 to Year 12 located in the southeast bay-side region of Melbourne. Improved outcomes in areas of student attendance, retention and achievement in education are important issues for Beachside where these indicators are well below the Australian and Victorian state average. The school began as a state technical (vocational) school in 1968 largely serving the population of the surrounding low-rise public housing community. In 1986 it was compulsorily and reluctantly amalgamated with the neighbouring academic high school during a period of forced school closures and amalgamations The area’s population has a markedly different age structure than that of Melbourne, with proportionately more youth (12-18 year olds) and retirees (65 years plus). The proportion of the population with lower than average individual income is 6% higher than metropolitan Melbourne. The percentage of single-parent families is also considerably higher than Melbourne. The school community is largely located in, and predominately comes from, a former public housing estate.

Contesting Discourses of engagement …
The phrase “engagement in school” or “student engagement” is often cited as an essential component of programmatic\textsuperscript{vii} interventions for at risk students. However, there have been very few attempts to define engagement other than behaviourally or to study it as part of the learning process. Researchers acknowledge that definitions of engagement encompass a wide variety of constructs that ‘can help explain how children behave, feel and think in school’ (Fredricks et al., 2003; 2004). These definitions are commonly a mix of (i) behavioural aspects of the student (ii) affective or emotional feelings and (iii) cognitive engagement that includes motivation, effort and strategy use of students. Haberman (1991) and Mohanty (1990) however suggest that resistance and engagement are not necessarily in binary opposition:

Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized
through systematic politicized practices of teaching and learning.  
(Mohanty, 1990, 180)

This view is echoed by one of BSC’s teachers when she admits that:

Sometimes teachers just give out work without dumbing it down for those students.  
Lots of the behaviour problems that I had ... is because students have language or literacy problems, they see 10 questions on the board and they just go “I can’t do it so why should I bother?” (Shelley)

Much of the research essentialises engagement, portraying it and its supposed concurrent academic success as a function of the individual, ignoring the contribution of gender, socio-cultural, ethnic and economic status (class) factors, and then making a link with what happens in classrooms. Finn’s (1989) participation/identification model has been readily adopted in Australia (Fullarton, 2002) and is characterised by associating lack of engagement with poor academic performance. According to this view, as schools become more effective, (judged by improved scores on National Benchmark levels, Tertiary Entrance Rankings), students are more engaged and academic performance is hence improved (Fredricks et al., 2004). These views see student engagement as something that teachers can organise for them and do to them (Luse, 2002, emphasis added). This typology takes no account that some students may be playing by the rules of the game as described by Haberman (1991).

Students who reject (for any reason) the school’s values are generally labelled alienated or disengaged. Schlechty (2002) recognises that even such students who withdraw or retreat are making conscious decisions about their schooling. This view is acknowledged by Beachside’s Year 7 Coordinator:

Students can have high engagement and not have high academic results in the A’s but even C’s in the middle range, so long as that is their best that they can do, then that is a successful outcome. (Etta)

Where engagement is defined (narrowly) as willingness to become involved in teacher initiated tasks and at the same time is separated from the students’ socio-economic and cultural contexts we find that if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible:

I think my enthusiasm as a learner [is vital]. I don’t think that some teachers realise how much impact their own moods have on their students. If you are enthusiastic about something and the students can see that you have put a lot of effort into what you are giving to them, then the results that you have are outstanding. (Shelley)
But if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student so that engagement is for some teachers:

[Student] enthusiasm for the task, time spent on the task, time that they are willing to spend on it and output, obviously, how much they have done. (Dom)

About having student interest, involvement, a willingness to learn, and an understanding of what is going on, I feel like if the students engaged then they have an awareness of what is happening around them and an awareness of their options, and that is what I personally think engagement is all about. (Lynn)

This reification of student engagement results in the identification and measurement of only those conditions that seem to encourage or impede engagement. This correlation between participation and achievement is mistakenly interpreted by proponents of Finn’s participation/identification model (Fullarton, 2002) and by most of the Beachside teachers as causality.

I would be saying to teachers, think about the effect that your behaviour has on the kids. Because all of these factors influence engagement, and it is not just about the curriculum that you teach, that is actually [only] a small part of it. (Shelley)

**Three contesting perspectives of social justice and engagement …**

[A]s the layers of the onion of understanding are peeled back and you worked out where people were at and who was pretending and who was really having a crack at … some different stuff, … I guarantee you will find “Oh we are really innovative here, the kids are doing a poster” and “they are re-writing the ending of the story” and “we are allowing them to transport the character from one time period to another”. And they regard that as innovation. Sorry folks, I was doing that in 1985, you are still doing it now in 2004 I think we have to question whether in fact we have really moved on. (Darren - Principal)

I previously (Zyngier, 2004b) described three dominant perspectives to account for engagement as (i) Instrumentalist or rational technical (ii) Social constructivist or individualist and (iii) Critical transformative engagement. Each of these discourses is now situated within the contesting teacher and student voices from Beachside Secondary.

**Instrumentalist or rational technical**

An instrumentalist or rational technical understanding of student engagement is grounded in an objectivist understanding this involved counting the numbers of students on task or completing assigned work, involved in particular activities and other extra curricula activities. There appears little or no attempt to ‘go beneath the surface’ to understand the meaning that students make of the activity or their motivation to participate.
Teachers at Beachside are committed and well intentioned, exhibiting initiative and effort to involve students in numerous activities. Built on teacher initiation or doing to or for, rather than doing with:

These activities are common to most schools and are illustrative of teachers trying, in various ways to develop both pedagogical and social activities in which students may be both involved and interested. (Vibert & Shields, 2003, 227)

A dominant deficit view prevails among many of the teachers that reflects the attitude that the students and parents were neither competent nor capable because of their background. For example, Dom puts all the “blame” on the students or their background because they:

Become disengaged, or not interested in doing it of course, because it is too difficult. Other things [that cause lack of engagement] don’t involve anything in this room or in this classroom ... because of factors that don’t involve the teacher. It could be external issues. ... I have students that come to class and I don’t think that much would engage them because they have some injury or some incident outside the school that distracts them. ... I don’t think a classroom teacher can help much. I think that it goes back to diet and habits at home, how they prepare themselves ... before they come to school, ... the home, ... the TV watching that goes on, the family situation. ... you can almost see from the student, ... what the family is going to be like as well. (Dom)

Coming into a new school from seven years of primary education all the students shared many of the common (usually baseless) fears about going to the big school. All the students interviewed were convinced that the level of academic work was going to be not just harder and greater, but it was also going to be challenging and exciting. Most of the students had expected that the level and volume of academic work at Beachside would be dramatically increased to what they had previously experience. Students commented that:

I thought it would be a lot harder and a lot more work ... and more challenging for me. ... I thought I was going to get more homework,... and go home and have to stay up late and finish all our homework. (Student)

Yet the students interviewed were insistent that teachers were giving them work that was far too easy for them. Disappointment was expressed by a number of students that the work was not as varied or as difficult as they had thought it would be such that:

I just want some hard work ... Year 7 isn't as hard as I thought it would be. It is usually the same as primary school, the same work, it is not that hard really. Some of the fast workers like me get our work done. The teachers have nothing for us to do and we have to sit there and do nothing. ... I found grade 6 harder ... Like it was more challenging because I knew I didn't want to get kept down, in primary school it was harder for me. ...I have to say year 7 isn't harder. (From various students)
Despite identification of their own engagement as important to their outcomes, many students accepted that some of the work, even if it did not offer an instant interest to them at this stage would be of benefit to them in the future. hooks (2003) like Haberman (1991) suggests that ‘many students stop the practice of learning because they feel learning is no longer relevant to their lives … They have learned … that book learning offered … has no relevance in the world outside …’ (hooks, 2003, 42). Even though they are only just beginning secondary school, they were already considering the long term benefits of academic success – the danger here is that gratification delayed may become gratification denied leading to at best passive or ritualistic engagement or at worst retreatist, rebellious or resistant forms of engagement (Schlechty, 2002). Students commented that:

_Not every work is fun, like some things can be boring but you have got to do it.... You need to get used to the homework because you are going to get a lot of it in year 12 and 11. I get bored with the maths, but I still do it - I know that I need a good education to get into university and to pass year 12. I don't like it but I still do it. When you do harder work you understand more. I just try my hardest at it because I don't know yet what I want to do when I am older, but I want to go to Uni[versity] and I know you need good marks to be able to get into Uni, so I try my hardest at everything._

Some of the teachers located the problem in the background of the student:

_Their skills are so weak, they are frighteningly weak, that these children can't read ... we have really got to work on their basic skills. How can they go off and research independently when they can't read? (Sally)_

Their parents too are reduced to being passive recipients of school-based programs rather than being empowered to be active partners in their children’s educational development (Smith et al., 2001, 132). Their style of pedagogy is typical of what Giroux (1994) criticised as “Education for Slackers” and Lingard (2006) as “Pedagogies of Indifference.”

Shor (1987) concludes that ‘through this vast vocational matrix, the great majority of the working class pass, getting a narrow skills-on-the-job training which is identified as education’ (Shor, 1987, 25). Clearly these teachers separate the curriculum from the every-day concerns of the student lives, where the academic studies are separated from self-concept and behaviour (Vibert et al., 2002). They are not prepared - as Giroux suggests is essential - ‘to fashion alternative analyses in order to understand what is happening to youth’ (Giroux, 1994, 210).
Social constructivist or individualist engagement

Social constructivist or individualist engagement is a more student centred pedagogy that envisages engagement as implicit in active learning where self-motivation, reflective shared goal setting and student choice that is located in the lived experiences of the students. This certainly produces more dignified and interesting classrooms, but it does not necessarily raise substantive (and critical) student inquiry that questions the acceptance of official knowledge (Apple, 1996), for all students not just the middle class. For some Beachside teachers student centred pedagogy envisages engagement as implicit in active learning where self-motivation, reflective shared goal setting and student choice is located in the lived experiences of the students:

I think they need to be interested in the task that they are doing, so something that is going to appeal to them, something that they see as not just doing in the classroom, but is going to be relevant to them once they step outside the classroom. (Lynn)

I think the more we can pour our energies into helping individual students [the better but] I think the other thing too we are trying to teach en masse some will pick it up, some won’t. The ones that pick it up... are the independent learners that have the skills to go about learning and I guess our job is to bring more of those students that aren’t able to, to get them to the level. (Theo)

Shor (1992) explains that situating learning in the students’ subjectivity and relating the subject area to student experience must be the ‘starting point, [followed by] the social context of the larger culture, and the academic context’ (Shor, 1992, 145). Such teachers are well meaning but often unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes about the capabilities of; in this case, working class and recently arrived migrant students who they feel inevitably lower school standards. Such teachers, hooks suggests, then believe they have to lower standards for these ‘backward students’ (hooks, 2003, 17).

For some of the Beachside teachers then, engagement becomes equated with compliance with adult (pre) determined rules and participation in adult (pre) determined and led activities. This produces underachievement by marginalised students who can actively ‘resent and resist an alien culture imposed on them’ (Shor, 1992, 202). Sally echoes Shor, concluding that for her students, the ‘culture of schooling has failed to train them in the dominant discourse and practices’ (Shor, 1992, 203):

There is a disregard for education, there is lack of respect for themselves, for their peers, for authority. I was hoping that we would have that opportunity to mould them,
mould the children ... because ... they don't value education. .... I think it is really important that our students know how to fit into society. (Sally)

Vibert and Shields (2003) claim that the student alone can't interrupt officially sanctioned discourses as ‘the right choices are powerfully inculcated in institutional habits, routines [and anyway] what in this context might student choice mean’ (2003, 7) in a system of schooling where domination is perpetuated? (Sefa Dei, 2003). Shor (1987) comments that:

Powerlessness results from feeling overwhelmed by an oppressive yet incomprehensible system. The contradictory presence and elusive of social control leads to confusion about what freedom is or what are the means to be free, happy and whole. (Shor, 1987, 56-57)

This is exemplified when a teacher introduced the animated film Shrek with:

“Now you have all got to shut up and listen because you are going to do a project on this”. You know ... the person who said it would know that that wouldn’t be the right way to present it, obviously, but sometimes when the kids are screaming ... you just say things without thinking. (Sally)

In such a situation shared decision making is an illusion for students if they are not able to question and interrupt their own marginalisation. hooks (2003, 18) and Haberman (1991) both indicate that in such situations low self esteem can cause even brilliant students to self-sabotage:

I can be as compassionate as possible, working within a group of 25 students, and then when other students see that compassion, not so much compassion, favouritism I guess you can call it, in their eyes, then they jack up. (Dom)

A student centred or social constructivist engagement defaults to a conservative position and ‘may become simply a more friendly method of encouraging on-task behaviour’ (Vibert and Shields, 2003, 8). So while a student remarks:

*No one really likes Miss because she like yells at us for nothing and gives us detention for nothing and it just gets annoying* (Student)

His teacher explains that:

I think it is really important that we do explain and help them to see why they are doing it. The notion “let the child decide what they want to learn” I just don't think they know what they want or they certainly don't know what they need to know. (Sally)

Shor explains that even when students ‘trust the good intentions’ of teachers, they have ‘already learned in traditional classes that a good student keeps quiet and agrees with the teacher’ (Shor, 1992, 93). Too often student centred teaching makes connections between classroom learning and the world
outside the school that remains uncritical and in the realm of make believe where teachers design activities that:

Initially I thought ... would be engaging because I thought ... it would be interesting or engaging enough to maybe do a bit more in depth unit on it. But because they had done it before, they seemed to say ... it's boring. (Theo)

Contrary to the “commonsense view” (McDonald, 2002) of constructivist pedagogy, Goodman (1992) and Shor (1996) suggest that this approach often promotes a “false” student centredness. While the teachers perceive this work as engaging because they ‘simulate real-world environments ... so that students can carry out authentic tasks as real workers would …’ (Day, 2002, 23), Sing and Luke (1996) caution that pedagogy based on ‘unproblematic notions of individualism and liberalism which attempt to recognise and celebrate difference per se’ (xiii) can actually conceal the pedagogical practices that are the cause of inequality of opportunity and outcomes for the disadvantaged in schools. Etta, the Student Coordinator at Beachside understood the connection and:

Found it really difficult that teachers were teaching this stuff but they weren't making any connections and perspectives of how that reflects in the real world and why they needed to do that. (Etta)

Shor (1987) critiques this individualist pedagogy as failing to problematise its examination of a real context drawn from student experience without expressing a critical view of daily life. Many of Etta’s colleagues continue to locate engagement in the individual student and this leads to an essentialisation and reification of engagement; students (teachers and the community) are therefore engaged when the school is an engaging place, but because:

The students we get here are weak, just incredibly weak so we have to look at various ways in which we can approach our subjects to engage the kids and to develop their skills in the area. (Sally)

**Critical - transformative engagement**

While a student centred pedagogy sees engagement through the student’s exploration and discovery of individual interests and experiences, a critically transformative or generative pedagogy (Zyngier, 2003) perceives student engagement as rethinking these experiences and interests increasingly in communal and social terms for the creation of a more just and democratic community and not just the advancement of the individual. All students should
be able to see themselves as represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist between different social groups. This perspective acknowledges that the lives of children and their communities are a curriculum of life (Smith et al., 1998, 2001) not just connected to student experience, but also actively and consciously critiquing that experience. This ‘situated teaching from everyday life’ (Shor, 1992, 44) rejects the superficial fetishisation or fixation on student interest – a ‘static entrapment in what students already know and say. What students bring to class is where the learning begins. It starts there and goes places’ (Shor, 1992, 44). One teacher realised that:

I ...found a whole heap of things [that] they knew ... that they didn’t think that they knew. Like they had these realisations of this knowledge and kids are like “I know that.” ... they had this knowledge but they had never realised they had it. ... [I]t wasn't packaged, like normally a kid will come in and go “in science I know this” and this wasn’t information that was packaged in their head, it was just in there, ... I think that is where you notice how much other things outside influence and that is the information that they don’t have packaged up. (Nelly)

Shelley also understands that the teacher is responsible for reversing passivity and provoking involvement, to learn the cognitive and affective levels of the class into which a serious study is situated (Shor, 1992, 54). She suggests that what is important is for students to:

Feel safe and supported in the classroom, that relationship stuff is really important and talking an interest in them, not just yelling at them because they are late to the class. (Shelley)

The students recognised that they were not as engaged in the work in the secondary as they had been in their primary years. They themselves identified a number of possible reasons for this ranging from disengaged teachers:

He (teacher) comes up and yells in your face and it is like you don’t want to be there. ... Well everyone doesn’t like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn’t listen to what she says. ... Always yelling and that. Cranky. Favouring other students and not having enough work prepared. ... He is always going off at kids for doing something wrong and we are not getting as much help as we want. (Student)

To disruption caused by other students;

They [other students] don’t really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don’t really learn what they are supposed to, so the work is hard for them. (Student)

Or to the work being too easy and repeating work already done.

Teachers have to explain it to us so that we actually know, like if they don’t explain it to us properly, not like “here you go” (Student)
The students were quite clear that if they can see a purpose to learning, they were more likely to do the work, even if it was something that they were not particularly interested in. Reflecting Haberman’s (1991) critique that classroom practice is not necessarily determined and imposed by the teacher, students commented that:

> If you crack it you are better off out there because you can calm down. If the teacher gets really frustrated ... they will make you come back inside. The teacher usually decides, but if you are in a bad mood and you walk out, they will decide whether they want to come and get you, or whether you can calm down and then they will come and get you. (Student)

Haberman raises the problematic issue that disadvantaged students are the most likely to reject out of hand (at least initially) new approaches that include intellectually challenging work in favour of repetitive, non challenging and for the student, educationally debilitating work. hooks (2003) adds that in such a classroom the only power ‘of subordinate groups is the power to demonize those with dominant positions.’ While this can perhaps alleviate the ‘fear and anxiety that usually abounds … where dominator culture is the norm, it is not useful if [the] goal is to intervene and change structures and individuals (hooks, 2003, 74).

A student notes this situation:

> There are people that try and ruin class time to [just] get out of it. (Student)

His teacher responds with the default transmissive or instrumentalist discourse:

> I know that if you write notes on the board and say “nobody goes until they are done” they are little angels and they will just sit there and copy it out but we all know that while we are doing that, we are doing it to buy our self a bit of respite. ... [W]e know that they are not learning anything doing that, so I don't want to teach like that. But the minute you just relax, actually ... lighten up a little bit ... mayhem breaks out, so you go back to your little tight world again. They are just a nasty group, they are horrible to each other, there is incredible bullying and misery, they are just not nice. ... [this class] couldn't give a damn. No they couldn’t care less. ... I really do not know what to do to engage those students. I would say with all their teachers we have all tried a myriad of approaches but we are not getting anywhere, I don't know what the answer is. (Sally)

Another student adds about their teacher, Sally that:

> Everyone doesn’t like her because she is grumpy and all that, but I think she is only grumpy because everyone is mean and doesn't listen to what she says and she goes and gets the co-ordinator and she comes and talks to us, or goes off at us or something. (Student)

This sort of demonisation where teachers see students as only and always their enemy makes the teacher part of the problem and not the solution
(hooks, 2003, 75). Sally may already hate her job and her students, feeling that the classroom situation has become pathological (Schlechty, 2002), that disciplinary issues are making it impossible to teach. Not only does she feel doomed, says hooks, but she is:

Condemned to stay in the prison of work she no longer [seems] to want to do … the students she teaches are also condemned, compelled to remain in a setting where the only hope of learning is the gaining of information from formulaic lesson plans. (hooks, 2003, 15)

If it is correct that teachers often operate in a classroom with an unwritten contract of “don't stress me and we won't disrupt your class” (Haberman, 1991) then change cannot be found solely in merely modifying the curriculum. Lynn, who the students rate as “a good teacher” reflects that:

First of all there are particular teachers that need to admit that their classes aren't operating the way that they want to. I have found that to be a little bit disheartening sometimes that you can quite clearly see that something wrong is happening in the classroom, something is going on that shouldn't be but the teachers response is “oh no it is ok it's fine” that has been frustrating. (Lynn)

While Sally considers her teaching with disillusionment, Lynn occupies a different standpoint from her colleagues, one that while revealing a ‘strange and threatening landscape … moves beyond illusion, so that [she] sees reality in the round – since what we are able to see depends entirely on where we stand’ (Parker Palmer in hooks, 2003, 20-21). Haberman suggests that marginalised students may still resist such efforts even when the teacher’s intent is to offer improved educational outcomes (Mcfadden and Munns, 2002, 361). Recognizing this, a teacher commented that:

They resist it because they don't understand it, like the way that I grew up or the way I see the world now or the way I live isn't the way that they see the world, isn't the influences that they have. (Nelly)

Kanpol's (1997a) research into similar “cynical eighth graders" describes the coping strategies of students as a counter-hegemonic agenda, as forms of institutional political resistance. This kind of resistance is noted by their teachers and students:

The students that would not normally play up do, there is a lot of movement around the classroom, they tend to push the boundaries knowing that there is a different teacher in the classroom. (Lynn)

It is just some people, they crack it so much in the class, they will walk out, ... it doesn't happen all the time but some people, they just think they are having a bad day. They crack it with the teacher and they go into a bad mood because they are getting frustrated and they slam the door. (Student)
This counter-hegemonic resistance is mainly concerned with breaking rules, use of oppositional language and developing survival mechanisms that challenge authority. hooks suggests that institutional resistance is the result of subordinated groups forming ‘community on the basis of shared negative beliefs and understandings about oppression’ such that ‘even as [students] identify ways dominator culture keeps them down’ they reinforce that “power” by seeing themselves only as “victims” reinforcing their own oppression as students have lost ‘sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of power’ (hooks, 2003, 73).

For a lot of them it would be, because they don’t really learn it because they are too busy shouting and getting kicked out of the room, so they don’t really learn what they are supposed to. (Student)

There is one particular student that is probably the smartest kid in the class, but he fails to hand in work on time, he does not complete homework as well. I think students know that they are breaking the rules and understand the implications as to what will happen but do not care. I think a difficult class is one that is not wanting to be there and not wanting to learn. (Lynn)

It is very noisy because none of us like the teacher and we just all crack it and we just do whatever we want and don’t listen to the teacher. (Student)

Such “confirmation bias” (hooks, 2003, 70) sees some teachers distinguishing certain students as less capable, then these students begin to perform in ways that will satisfy the teacher’s (low) expectations. Other researchers (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) termed this a “Pygmalion Effect” which is clearly evident at Beachside:

I have got quite a few students in my class that are not against throwing a chair if it means, and they have learnt this over years at school as well, they behave really poorly, you get sent out, you get suspended, they learn the system really quickly. ... Some of these kids just don’t want to be involved in what is going on. ...They get in there and you are doing an activity that they don’t like, or they have had a rough day and they just don’t want to be involved. Some of the kids will do anything they can to get out of it, and they know how to get out of it. (Nelly)

Many of Beachside’s teachers seem more comfortable with mediocrity as this serves as confirmation of what hooks (2003, 89) refers to as a ‘deep seated belief in the [students’] inferiority’.

If your students can’t achieve what you expect them to achieve, just give them grade four work, they will succeed at that and say, well I have done my job. If our students have level four numeracy there is just no point forcing them to learn year 7 work if they have missed something. (Dom)

Kanpol views this resistance as of little substance and distinguishes this from a more critical ‘substantive counter-hegemony of cultural political resistance’
(Kanpol, 1997b, 5 emphasis in original) where all students see themselves as represented in a curriculum that challenges hierarchical and oppressive relations that exist between different social groups. Resistance can, however, turn to counter-hegemonic engagement through generative connectedness ‘found in the unsettled intersections of personal life and society’ (Shor, 1992, 55), through a focus on problems from student experience which is intellectually challenging, a critical reflection that goes beyond opinion. This can be ‘problematic enough to inspire students to do intellectual work’ (Shor, 1992, 5), even among ‘basic-skills’ students. A teacher perceiving that a resolution to this resistance is possible comments that:

They have such skewed understanding of what is going on around them that you really need to base it on things that they understand and the things that begin at possibly the things that they feel comfortable with because jumping outside their comfort zone with some of our kids is not the best way to start something off. (Nelly)

Student culture and connectedness are taken seriously by Nelly, where sometimes teachers explicitly disagree with students and are prepared to argue student choices with them. Nelly understands that ‘empowering education is initiated and directed by a critical teacher but is democratically open to student intervention’ (Shor, 1992, 85). Nelly clearly understands that:

If the students are engaged then they have an awareness of what is happening around them and an awareness of their options, and that is what I personally think engagement is all about. (Nelly)

hooks declares that the classroom should be an ‘exciting place, never boring. And if boredom should prevail, then pedagogical strategies were needed that would intervene, alter, disrupt’ (hooks, 1994, 7). Echoing Haberman (1991) and Schlechty (2002) the students were not interested in just having fun all the time but did want to be challenged.

*I think it is because we get bored, most of the time.* (Student)

Some of the teachers at BSC, in particular Shelley and Nelly, recognise that they are transformed as they teach students and as they learn from them.

This pedagogical reciprocity:

Disconfirms unilateral authority [and] by accepting student discipline, a power-sharing teacher then becomes democratically (not institutionally) authorised to make higher demands on the students because students have been authorised to make higher demands on the teacher. (Shor, 1996, 125)
The link to lack of student engagement was clear even to the students. Many felt that students “acted up” in order to get out of classes that they found boring, and that some teachers were not effective in preventing these incidents within their classroom. Low self esteem may lead students to “self-sabotage” (hooks, 2003, 18). Failing to provide challenging work for “able” students also led to them becoming involved in disrupting others suggesting:

_They (worksheets) are just put on our tables and they just say “work” and make us work until the bell goes. … I get bored after work, when I have finished all my work and I start getting bored and restless and throwing things around. … The teacher is too busy telling off the people that are shouting, they don't have enough time to come to you and help you._

These students sometimes seem to give up hope and do poorly in their work taking on what hooks calls “the mantle of victimhood”:

_They fail. They dropout. Most of them have no guides to teach them how to find their way in the educational systems, that though structured to maintain domination, are not closed systems and therefore have within them subcultures of resistance where education as the practice of freedom still happens. (hooks, 2003, 48)_

Students recognized the need for greater teacher control and that removing students from the class often resulted in disruption to other classes:

_And with other teachers they are like "Come in here" we are noisy and they give us a warning and they remind us again and it is like you are in for detention, the whole class, and with others they… teach us for a little while and then we get a bit noisy or people don't want to work and they just give up and they sit there looking. (Student)_

Students that would otherwise stay on task became involved in disruption when teachers were not seen to be in control. Some students even mentioned that they were frightened to come to school because of the disruption. Students however were able to identify those teachers and teaching pedagogies that were effectively able to engage them in their learning. They wanted teachers to learn from each other about what works:

_Lynn teaches us literacy and English and she helps everyone and all that and when we do reading with her she puts us in different groups so that everyone is up to their own reading level. (Student)_

Newmann concludes that all schools must change their pedagogical practices so that they deliver authentic pedagogy equally to students regardless of gender, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity (Newmann, 1996). It is incumbent on the teacher to become educated about the students she or he is teaching to facilitate structuring curriculum around the experiences of the
students (Shor, 1992). A minority of Beachside teachers expressed a view that transformative engagement was something that teachers were responsible for:

A good teacher does his or her homework first, student engagement starts off with... finding tasks that will keep the class really interested and student engagement is about self directed learning as well, and about clarity. If students know exactly what they have to do, why they have to do it and how they will be assessed, they are a lot more engaged then in photocopying a section out of a textbook, coming into class and saying “read this and answer these questions” because they can’t link it to anything. (Shelley)

Parker describes transformative engagement as:

Education at its best – this profound human transaction called teaching and learning – is not just about getting information … [but] about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world. (Palmer, 1997)

The Student Coordinator at Beachside acknowledges this differentiation clearly recognising that transformative engagement has the potential to disrupt the comfort zone of “confirmation bias”:

I look at the older teachers in our staffroom who are more senior ..., they are more mature and ... from a [different] cultural background, I think that they should have had some sort of leadership role ... but they were as clueless as any of us. (Etta)

How students would increase engagement
All the students were able to give examples of the kind of work and activities that they felt made it easier to learn, and made them more likely to want to be attentive in class:

I would make it easier so that kids can get their say in what they do, because sometimes teachers don’t listen. .... They made sure everyone knew how to do it. They won’t go on with the work until they knew everyone knew how to do it. .... To have 3 separate groups of intelligence levels for like how smart we are at maths or English. .... To just jump ahead and learn as much as you can, get motivated. .... The most enjoyable projects and all that we do would have to be the hands on stuff. .... [I want] a classroom where there are big tables and zero noise. (Various students)

They also expressed ideas that they felt teachers could use to make the lessons more rewarding. Interestingly, many of these were also suggested by some of the staff interviewed:

I am learning and I know that makes them learn to. They know that I am excited and they feel that I am involved so they keep wanting to learn because I keep wanting to learn. I don’t say “I am high and mighty, I am the teacher, you should find out” I tell them very honestly “I don’t really know, I have been learning just like you and I am still learning so you have to learn with me." (Etta)
The few teachers who recognised the potential of transformative engagement to disrupt the paradigm of domination understand the value of risk and that ‘the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict’ (hooks, 2003, 64). This included advice to ensure that all students understand the aims of the lesson; different activities for classes - using different learning tools; “able” students given the opportunity to develop additional skills; teachers expressing an interest in the subject and the students; not allowing disruption by students in the classroom; students having some say in choosing tasks and opportunities to work on projects. hooks, like the students at Beachside suggests that teachers need to ‘challenge themselves to teach beyond the classroom setting, to move into the world sharing their knowledge, learn a diversity of styles to convey information (hooks, 2003, 43).

A minority of Beachside teachers recognized that not only should the student world be valued, but that students need to be given the opportunity to voice and discover their ‘own authentic and authoritative life in order to retrieve the learning agenda’ (Giddens, 1994, 121). The more authority exercised by students, the more legitimate is the teachers’ authority, and the ‘less reason to sabotage the class and their own intellectual development’ (Shor, 1996, 125-126).

If the students are able to voice their opinions right from the start and get clear in their minds what their peers are saying about what they are doing, then students become more engaged. (Shelley)

Such teachers understand that ‘the individual can act’ and that their actions ‘have weight’ (hooks, 2003).

**Conclusions**

Important work is currently being undertaken in Australia (and elsewhere) on the kinds of pedagogies that improve outcomes for all students, (Lingard et al., 2001a, Lingard et al., 2001b; Newman et al. 2001) but in particular those variously labelled as at-risk of early school leaving, disadvantaged or from low socio-economic backgrounds.

My research proposes that an engaging or CORE pedagogy should ensure that what teachers and students do is:
Connecting - to and engaging with the students’ cultural knowledge
Owning – all students should be able to see themselves as represented in the work
Responding – to students' lived experiences and actively and consciously critiquing that experience
Empowering – students with a belief that what they do will make a difference to their lives and the opportunity to voice and discover their own authentic and authoritative life (Zyngier, 2007).

For young people at risk, there is already too often an assumption that they are at best, poor learners. Through their own fault, or their parents’, or decisions made by the school, or fate, teachers too often assume that these young people are able to exercise only limited control over their destinies. In an uncertain future, these factors may seem to remove any element of choice. Yet these same young people still assert strongly that they are in control:

“No-one makes decisions for me”; “we don’t know where we are going, but we’ll get there” (Brown and Holdsworth, 2001, 118-119).

In the end, it is about what the students themselves say and think (Zyngier, 2004a). It is too simplistic to define engagement in terms of deficiencies arising in the students. Historically the disengaged were those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities and family structures were in opposition to the dominant (white, middle-class) culture that schools were designed to serve and support (Hickson and Tinzman, 1990; Alexander, 2000; hooks, 2003). The struggle over the definition of the term engagement is significant in itself for it reveals the on-going ideological and epistemological divisions among educators and policy makers, and the general public. Research on student dis/engagement has shown that an exploration of the questions of class, power, history and particularly students’ lived experiences and social reality reveal a complexity of factors that lead marginalised youth to leave school prematurely. It is therefore crucial that questions of power, equity, and engagement with difference be addressed if we are to improve (learning) outcomes, not just for the most marginalised youth, but for all. This research suggests that the complexity of issues relating to student
engagement (and early school leaving), cannot be fitted neatly into decontextualized accounts of youth experience, school interaction and socio-environmental factors that create in the first instance student disempowerment and disengagement with school. A transformative student engagement is an empowering one developing a sense of entitlement, belonging and identification where pedagogical reciprocity creates ‘practices that engage students providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply’ (hooks, 1994, 22). Otherwise students are still ‘doing time, not doing education’ (Sefa Dei, 2003, 251).
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i Teacher comments are (fictitiously) named and are quoted in Times New Roman font while
student comments are in Times New Roman italic font. All other quotations are in ARIAL font.
ii The Blue Print Program introduced by the then Minister of Education Kosky see
iii Keymakers – a reference to the character in The Matrix- Reloaded. His purpose was to give
Neo the key to the Source as well as tell him what to do and lead him to it. He can make a
key to fit any door, but can neither open the door or enter through it. For a fuller explanation
see http://www.briandemilio.com/matrix.html#Keymaker
iv All names are fictitious.
v The concept of ‘like’ schools has been developed to enable schools to allow for the
composition of their student populations in assessing their performance. The state has been
divided into 9 groups of schools based upon the background characteristics of students. The
groups are identified by the proportion of students for whom the main language spoken at
home is not English, and the proportion of students who receive the Education Maintenance
Allowance (EMA) or Commonwealth Youth Allowance.
vi Pov – slang meaning poor, low class, worthless
vii The analysis of the programmatic discourse in relation to understanding how the term
engagement is used in education department and government policy documentation is
beyond the scope of this paper.