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REDEFINING VET IN SCHOOLS – ADVANCING THE MIDDLE CLASSES?

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ABSTRACT

The narrowing of social gaps in educational outcomes has been a general theme of recent education policy. This paper will focus on a case study to draw on a deeper understanding of how reforms to Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools in New South Wales (NSW) are impacting on class issues, and how families from different, or mixed, social-class groupings articulate with schooling.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will report on a three year Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project into vocational education and equity in senior secondary schooling in New South Wales, which was completed in 2003 (Crump & Connell, 2003). The research explored the relationship between VET and young people’s futures, by investigating the reforms to the NSW external Year 12 exam, (the Higher School Certificate [HSC] assessment process) in which VET courses gained a new and more challenging profile. The intent of the “Securing Their Future” reforms was to make secondary curriculum more socially inclusive and thus set up young people with broader options for lifelong learning and employment, also articulated in the NSW “Charter for Equity in Education and Training” NSW Department of Education and Training (1996). This was to be achieved by reducing distinctions between programs of study that tended to separate privileged students from others, mainly through matriculation status.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Recently, international studies of the middle class are re-emerging as explanatory accounts of the conceit of contemporary educational reforms. This paper will indicate how these reforms to matriculation in NSW only weakly

counter a “poverty of expectations” about lifelong-learning options based largely on class lines. While accepting responsibility for improving educational options for young people over their lifetime, the state remains a poor distributor of those options. Policy intent is, to a large degree, defeated by the complexity of critical and pragmatic problem solving in educational provision, and the interplay of factors beyond schooling and within young people’s lives.

In 2003, research into social class was restored to the education policy research agenda, now refreshingly looking out the middle classes and policy reforms such as the marketisation of education by Power, Edwards, Whitty, and Wigfall (2003) and Ball (2003). Power, et al. (2003, p. 1) deliberately mimicked work from the 1960s on working class families and disadvantage, this time “exploring the dynamics and dilemmas of ‘expected’ success and human situations of over 300 academically promising” young people. Power, et al. (2003, p. 151) also report that, despite the policy talk of ‘standards being the key’, structures continue to facilitate or hinder educational advantage, regenerating social divisions, limiting competition, and restricting access to the most desirable credentials. Ball (2003) focuses on particular “moments” in the policy cycle where parents, in a relationship with the state, attempt to exploit structure and rhetoric to the educational advantage of their child. Ball (2003, p. 5) argues

that the middle class is worth investigating because it is a major phenomenon, though cautions that it is a class beset with contradiction and uncertainties, and has been so throughout the modern age.

In this paper, expanding on the conceptual work of Power, et al., I look at the “paucity of expectations” of success or failure, through the eyes on one rural, mixed-class community. My researched “moment” is subject choice for, and the experience of, senior secondary schooling, within a participant matrix of all socio-economic status (SES) groups, race, gender, and ethnicity. Thus I also use Bernstein’s (1996) classifications that ascribe certain educational identities to children, actively sought, and contrasting to those of other classes. Given this recent research overseas, it is likely that social class remains a key element in social and economic reproduction in Australia, with real and symbolic struggles occurring through the practice of these identities, often best expressed in matters such as school choice. It is my contention that similar struggles occur within vocational education and training in schools as part of a broader experience of preparing for lifelong learning.

METHODOLOGY

Kingston High School is situated in an outlying “industrial suburb”, about six kilometres east of the main township (*note*, all names of people and places are pseudonyms). It is a “modern” school, with well-designed buildings, lots of space, and generally, good facilities. Currently, there are less than 800 students, with student numbers undergoing a steady decline from over 1,000 in the mid-1990s. This school was chosen on the project matrix as *Rural : Low VET : Medium SES* (the other 7 case studies being variations of this matrix). The only reason the project categorised the school as “low VET” was because of the comparatively small number of Industry Curriculum Frameworks (ICFs) undertaken in the first year of the new HSC and, as has been mentioned, this was a deliberate strategy of the school to do it right. Our initial measurement was not an accurate account quantitatively, let alone qualitatively!

The VET and general staff were very supportive of, and interested in, the project during our visits, though naturally it was only a small part of their thinking and day-to-day occupational concerns. Our visits were noted positively in the

newsletter to parents, etc., and we became known and welcomed faces at the school reception area, staff room, and school grounds. Interviews were conducted with eight staff, twenty-one Year 11 students, eleven Year 12 students, and four parents (*note*, interviewing figures are lower than those for other site reports due to the lower number of VET-in-Schools [VETiS] Courses on offer at Kingston, especially in 2001). Site visits and interviewing were done in 2000 and 2001, with follow-up interviews in 2002. In 2002, 45 Year 11 students were doing a VET course (out of a cohort of 101); and 32 Year 12 students were doing a VET course (out of a cohort of 110). Both the Year 11 and the Year 12 groups are doing three ICFs taught at the school: “Hospitality Operations”, “Building and Construction”, and “Metals and Engineering”. Other VET and TVET (VET for school students conducted at a College of Technical and Further Education [TAFE]) options were available to students at Kingston High.

The project began with the full support of the then principal who had spent some time building up VET options and resources in the school. This principal’s support for VET was acknowledged throughout the school and made our access easier and our presence valued. Two of the project staff visited Kingston High School to conduct interviews, and on other occasions to observe and participate in other activities, e.g., the Year 10 Parent Information Night (for subject selection to Years 11/12), the school’s courses and careers night, classroom observations, sitting in at staff meetings, and mixing with staff at morning tea. The project liaised through one staff member responsible for VET implementation but worked broadly across the school. The project team developed full analytical profiles of each of the eight case studies, which were then triangulated through a variety of presentations to academics, VET school coordinators, and education and curriculum bureaucrats.

CASE STUDY

Kingston provides cheap housing and a variety of traditional trade opportunities through employers buying up cheaper industrial land. Many of the VET students we interviewed were hopeful to get employment locally. One student, “He was a guy out of left field”, found work in Wagga but, as Doug (Metals) told us, most are “thinking of work at the bottom of Kingston

Street. Anything to do with metal would be fine, except [job prospects] are not in the immediate proximity!". However, Kingston should not be characterised simply as a poor, outlying, disadvantaged area. Some people live in a new private housing estate. Most houses show pride of ownership, with gardens generally well-tended, and late model, or well-maintained, cars in most driveways, though undercurrents of the negative effects of poverty are there to be found.

Site visits and interviews suggested that most students were happy to be at school and were supported by their parents in the choices made about schooling. The playground was noisy but generally good-humoured and the VET classes, at least, were active and constructive places where teachers were able to teach, and do so with some satisfaction. However, the growing number of Indigenous families moving into the area, and filling Kingston's feeder schools, has contributed to "white flight" even though the nearest government high school does not have a stronger reputation for academic achievement than Kingston. The school generally hails its successes with Aboriginal students, and one of the most informative and insightful students interviewed was an Aboriginal student doing Hospitality (one of two for the first time in 2001). Poverty and race were not issues openly addressed, but lay beneath the surface in a number of topics during interviews and observations. Ethnicity was not an issue at all, at least in our data. Non-English-Speaking-Background (NESB) students were conspicuous by their absence in all our rural cases.

KINGSTON HIGH SCHOOL

Kingston High School was built at the end of the 1970s. The school's motto is "Truth, Courtesy, Co-operation" and it advertises itself as "A Languages High School". However, the school is known in the community as offering a sound and diverse senior curriculum, rather than any particular specialisation. The school brochure describes Kingston as seeking "excellence through a caring school with high academic standards and a wealth of cultural, sporting and social activities". The school has not tried to compete with the other local government secondary school, but rather to cooperate and share resources, curriculum options, and professional development. There is a degree of self-interest as well as idealism as both government high schools face very stiff competition from a high number and wide

variety of non-government options in the region, from low-fee to high-fee Catholic, Anglican, and fundamentalist-Christian schools. Recently, the Catholic Education Commission has bought land just behind Kingston High School to build a second Catholic school for the area. Kingston's teachers see this as an aggressive action.

STUDENTS, FAMILIES AND CLASS

Students at Kingston come from a wide community perimeter, and school zoning does not appear to operate as rigidly as it does for comprehensive government schools in most metropolitan areas; and even in O'Connor (a town nearby of similar size to Kingston).

One teacher observed,

When I first arrived it was. If you didn't live in Kingston you could not get a place here. But then we were over 1,000 students at that stage, and probably closer to 1,200. There just wasn't the room. It was a pretty popular place. Now there's just been a steady decline [in numbers, so zoning becomes irrelevant]. [Once] we could be picky but now I think we just need to try and keep the numbers up a bit, so we'll take them if they want to come. (Tony, Information Technology and Communication [ITC])

Zoning encouraged the mistaken belief that all government comprehensive schools were identical in their provision and opportunity. Parents and carers know this is not true, which partly explains why they are happy to shop around within the government system, or beyond if the government system is rigid and unresponsive. Parents and children know that geographical access is unequal, in Sydney and the Bush, so are willing to flout the zoning rules or step away from them by going to an alternative provider.

Students travel up to an hour, and up to 50 kilometres, to get to Kingston and this has an impact on the school day. It is very difficult to offer classes before or after school, as school buses from these country areas rule the timetable. The school organizes itself so that every Thursday afternoon students are free to do a long block of their VETiS, attend a TAFE, or go to a LinkUp course. Students are trusted to travel widely, and outside school hours. There are misadventures, and some students do not always make it to the TAFE; but these are

students known to teachers as being unresponsive to school-based education but as having enormous potential for lifelong learning if they are invigorated by the adult atmosphere of colleges of TAFE.

The level of academic achievement in the school has always been mixed. But now the mix has changed, and VET is seen as having “saved a lot of our kids”. As one staff member noted,

When you look at a student, behaviour-wise ... often kids who hated school before [their] self esteem improves. [VET is] a positive thing for all kids. (Kath, Hospitality)

The school unobtrusively assists many students with costs for VET courses. While this “hides” poverty, it preserves people’s dignity so it is not surprising the commitment of students to VET courses at Kingston has been strong. There is a significant allocation of resources to VET and students become committed and loyal to these courses (and their teachers). Parents seem to encourage and value what their students are learning in VET.

Many staff have been at the school for a long time. Kath (Hospitality), for example, has been there since 1980. However, one of the VET teachers has come from a trade and TAFE background. Both backgrounds work. While Kath was able to bring “20 years of teaching at this location” into making the new course work, Wally brought his knowledge of industry and his links with TAFE teachers and procedures. Both teachers brought additional opportunities to their students and were highly regarded for their dedication and care. VET staff feel valued and supported, as Kath explained,

We are held in pretty high regard by most of the staff which is nice. Because I hear sometimes when I go into other schools that the [VET] teachers feel they count for nothing. We get a lot of support here because they see what we do is important, that helps a lot. It must be terrible to be seen by your colleagues as having the inferior course. Our principal really supports us. (Kath, Hospitality)

The mother of a Year 11 Hospitality student named Emily told us her daughter wanted to be a solicitor,

[but] ... she’s probably worried about the situation of how to pay for it. [We’re a] below-average income family. Then she thought “I’d love to teach health or aerobics” ... She works at KFC and that’s mainly because of our money problems ... I can’t provide her with a fairy-tale ending. That’s the way it is.

Emily’s ambition to be a solicitor was not unrealistic, given that her mother’s background is traditional middle class, with one of the mother’s brothers employed as a heart specialist and another as a computer scientist. But Emily’s ambitions are unsustainable in her family situation. Deirdre, Emily’s mother, told us that she married for love, “I wanted to get married and have children. That was my life’s ambition. I didn’t really care about anything else”. Now Deirdre understands, with a degree of bitterness, that “My sister and I are nothing [laughs]. We’re nothing, but yeah, you know”.

This reflects the penalty women played in middle class families in Deirdre’s generation, with gender roles segregated and life options for young middle class women restricted compared to those for men. Male career goals were seen as more important than those of daughters – whose goal was to “marry well”; that is, marry someone like their brother or male peers who did go on to higher education and to a well-paid job and raise a family. Deirdre did not “marry well”. Deirdre’s husband was raised very differently.

... he was always told he was going to be nothing, and he often says to Emily when he’s in a bad mood... “Oh, what are you worried about, you’re going to be nothing but a check-out chick” Michael came from a very poor family, you know, 6 children. His mother had to go to work. No one was home. He had to raise his sisters. He’s a good man, but he’s got this attitude that I don’t understand, and it reflects on the kids. I think he has done damage to my son, who’s 21, and he hasn’t become anything. (Deirdre, student mother)

While Deirdre sees her marital relationship based on love, class differences bring tensions to decisions about Emily’s education. Despite all this, Deirdre sees Emily as different to herself; “I want her to stay that way. She’s just great!”; and sees her as possibly Australia’s first female prime minister (if she could get into Law).

Emily had a friend who obtained a traineeship in Hospitality and, according to her mother, Emily was very envious and said “She’s so lucky, I would love that!”. But her mother said “No, you’re not leaving school yet. Maybe after Year 12”! This is a wonderful example of how a Kingston parent managed a difficult (though loved) daughter through a mix of humour and guidance.

Deirdre’s family depicts a type at Kingston that finds VET attractive. They are professional or self-employed parents who have a lifestyle at or near Kingston that is different to the lifestyle and choices they would have made in a metropolitan area; that is, less than “middle class” in the sense that living at or near Kingston generates a different environment, and thus different life choices for them and their children, despite their class background. This raises the issue, already demonstrated for the UK, where middle class students can “take over” VET courses once they become more “academic” and mainstream, as in the new HSC. At Kingston, it was the case that the students doing VET courses came from families with some composition of middle-class background and values, but VET was not necessarily a second choice, filler, or “down time” subject.

Many other students doing VET were from families with at least one parent who had a professional or tertiary qualification. One of the biggest surprises to both interviewers (given the stereotypes and labelling we were operating on) was to find out that some of the parents of students we interviewed from farms, for example, were highly qualified and widely talented people who were mixing middle class occupations – and Sydney weekday jobs – with a rural lifestyle. Kingston’s broad range of options and curricular program flexibility is being used to provide options and opportunities for students aimed at keeping them in education and training – thus providing a basis for improving students’ life chances.

In the case of the mothers interviewed, tertiary qualifications had fallen into disuse, though the qualifications were there for use later on and as an example to their children. Most students at Kingston have part-time work to provide money to the family and themselves, and there is at least one example of a student operating a business. None of the students I interviewed felt that their friends saw them as “second-class” for taking VET classes. This may be a result of

being a member of a small, close student body, but I believe that there are broader factors at work. It does not mean that the traditional divide between general and vocational education has been bridged at Kingston, but it suggests that there is an increasing individualisation, and consumerisation, of education whereby people’s choices are seen as a personal matter, not a community or social event. Education in Australia is being conceptually challenged as a public good, and increasingly re-conceptualised as a market commodity. There is good and bad in this, but it is a difference of perception rather than a contradiction because there has always been an education market.

DISCUSSION

The failure to identify an acute academic-vocational divide in staff and student attitudes at Kingston suggests that, in this case study, the traditional hierarchy of courses is becoming less relevant to students making subject selections and, perhaps, less a marker of school and career choice status, and social class, as the mix of credentials and pathways to and through careers expands. Senior secondary “success” as traditionally defined (that is, by a high university admission score [UAI] that is rewarded by entry into a high-status degree program) thus loses power as a determinant of social standing, even while still in the senior school. Wanting to own a McDonalds’ store, as one of the students, Anthea, hoped, offers personal, material, and career rewards unimaginable through traditional working-class education and training routes; no longer relying on school to achieve such an outcome. Retail traineeships at McDonald’s, as elsewhere, can lead to Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) qualifications, as well as management training up to an advanced diploma. Anthea experienced being treated like an adult and felt she had begun a structured process of lifelong learning that would bring personal and economic rewards.

As demonstrated by Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000), the educational pathways and credential building practices of young people in the 21st century follow obtuse, tangential, and sometimes improbable trajectories, aided and abetted by further and higher education sectors keen to enrol students, often outside the matriculation process. Students’ talents are being increasingly recognised in contexts outside systemic educational institutions. VET students are using work to make sense of schooling, as well as to

further career goals in a way that traditional schools could never assist or enable. The VET staff at Kingston know this and are able to put that knowledge to use because the school's administration provides the flexibility and where-with-all to do this.

If VETiS leads to positive, rewarding, and properly remunerated employment, as it can (see Te Riele and Crump, 2002), then being in a selective school – or “out-of-zone” in a government school in a privileged area, and thus attempting to “maximise your UAI” – may be seen as an acceptable choice for some, but not necessarily the best or only choice for all. This shift in perception, if more widely spread, could reaffirm the value of a community comprehensive secondary school, an ideal never fully expressed. VET at Kingston was a first, and positive, choice for most students, appearing to suit the practical and entrepreneurial qualities needed to live and work – or to simply “make do” – in a rural/regional setting. But a school's curriculum can create a perception of “choice” – even when that choice is narrow.

CONCLUSION

Any school's subject selection process shapes an apparition of a brighter future for young people, but this apparition masks powers and constraints shaped both by the education system (Crump, 1995), and the socio-economic and cultural milieu of that school's community. Social class and race is sharply defined in a regional setting like Kingston, with specific geographical boundaries for the town and what schools can do or offer. Kingston's work on creating a broader and more relevant senior school curriculum was a direct and explicit attempt to provoke a challenge to the non-government sector and provide a long-term future for its' students, largely through providing a base for lifelong learning and credential building (Crump, 2002). It is possible VET in the new HSC in NSW is a policy that evades the need for fundamental reform to schools, and lacks reflexivity within

existing institutional structures, but at least it is not a rhetorical fallacy. The next question is will a debt-averse working class be able to pay for further and higher education now fees are the key to lifelong learning?

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