From authoritarian to democratic schooling – schooling that empowers young people

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Introduction

School disengagement

This paper is concerned with a group of young people who have been known to educational sociologists variously as ‘lads’, ‘rebels’ and ‘youth at risk’. I refer to the young people who have been alienated from the core youth institution of education, and who have responded to this alienation with behaviour such as truancy, classroom disruption, poor school performance and early school leaving (see White, 1996). A strong body of evidence suggests that it is this group of young people who suffer the greatest social and economic disadvantage post-school. For instance recent research shows that early school leavers are more likely to be in low skill, low wage work, or unemployed, post-school (Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Dusseldorp, 2007). Further, young people who leave school early because of negative ‘push factors’ (such as alienation from school) rather than pull factors (such as securing full-time employment or training) are at much greater risk of facing the above problems (Smyth et al., 2002). In some cases alienation from school can lead to severe and long lasting exclusion from all social institutions (see Wyn & White, 1997).

The question, then, which social researchers have long grappled with, is what can be done to re-engage these young people in school? The most convincing responses advocate school reform (see, for instance, Connell et al., 1982; White, 1996; Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Smyth et al., 2002). This position is founded on the premise that certain types of young people are more likely than others to become disengaged from school (for example, those from the working class and ethnic minorities), and that this reflects a problem with the school
system, rather than the young person per se (see Teese, 2000). Recent recommendations regarding school reform have centred on curriculum restructuring, especially the development of vocational curriculum and training (for example Smyth et al., 2002), as well as teaching practice reform (for example te Riele, 2006).

Both of these areas are important and require political attention. However, unfortunately, as White and Wyn (2004) suggest, in contemporary Australia the worth of schooling is measured by the exchange value that school knowledge has on the labour market. This understanding of schooling promotes a technical-rational approach to school reform which fails to recognise that schooling is foremost a ‘relational and emotional practice’ (te Riele, 2006, p. 62). Hence, the type and quality of knowledge provided by schools has been a constant on the educational reform agenda (White & Wyn, 2004), while teaching practices have been largely absent (te Riele, 2006). Despite this, the work of, for instance, Freire (1970), Willis (1977), Connell and colleagues (1982) and te Riele (2006) demonstrates that the relation between a young person and their teacher is just as, or more, important to that young person’s experience of school than the knowledge available to them. For instance, te Riele’s (2006) qualitative study of young people at a ‘last chance’ school shows how teacher and student relations characterised by fairness, respect and care can encourage longer, happier and more successful student school careers. It is this theme of teacher and student relations and the impact they have on young people’s engagement with school that will be the focus of this paper.

**Schooling relations and school systems**

Teacher and student relations are deeply embedded in the formal and informal ‘control systems’ of a school (Connell et al., 1982; Connell, 1985). These systems may differ from school to school, especially across public and private, and mainstream and alternative schools, however they remain strongly tied to the socio-historical context in which the school exists (Connell et al., 1982). Traditional systems of school control were structured by a ‘knowledge hierarchy’; those with knowledge (teachers) held power over those without knowledge (students). Order was maintained because the teacher held a position of authority within the school and was able to use legitimate force (i.e. detention, suspension, corporal punish-
ment or expulsion) (Connell, 1985). This school system fostered authori-
tarian teaching practices, as teachers relied on authority to gain the control
required to teach (Connell, 1985).

Authoritarian teaching practices are still utilised today in those schools
which are able to maintain systems of legitimate classroom authority
based on the currency of knowledge. However, these teaching practices
were, and continue to be, alienating for many young people and can create
a rift between young people and teachers, and young people and school.
Willis’ (1977) classic study is testimony to this. The young men in Wil-
lis’ research sought to reject the subordinate position allotted them by
the school system through opposing the authority of the teacher. They
used disruptive school behaviour and truancy as strategies to combat the
teacher’s power over them. Ironically this ultimately resulted in the young
men’s entry into unskilled labour and permanent labour market subordi-
nation, as is still the case today (see Dwyer, 1996).

Willis (1977) did not believe that different teaching practices per se would
have changed the school outcomes of these young men. He argued that
while the young men fought against the unequal power relations of the
school they also respected the teachers who fought back against this chal-
lenge to their authority. Failure of the teachers to fight back meant a loss
of authority, and loss of authority meant a loss of power (see Connell,
1985 for similar findings). Instead, what Willis’ work demonstrated was
the need for a new system of school control; a system in which teachers
and students could have equal power relations and work together, rather
than teachers acting on students (see Freire, 1970) and a system in which
all young people are treated equally, rather than some young people achiev-
ing esteem through mastery of knowledge (see Connell et al., 1982). It is
to this idea that this paper now turns.

**From authoritarian to democratic schooling**

Research such as that by te Riele (2006) suggests that in contemporary
Australian society, at some schools at least, the choice is being made to
transform practices of school control. Her work depicts a school that
fosters more democratic relations between teachers and students, largely
because of the different systems of school control it offers compared to
mainstream schooling. For instance te Riele contends that:
Students referred to a sense of mutual respect, which contributed to feeling treated as equals and adults … They found the environment or atmosphere to be friendly and relaxed … [This] was the result of staff questioning the usual school practices that had not worked for many of their students, and replacing them with practices that served the interests of the students rather than the school (2006, pp. 66–68).

Te Riele’s (2006) work makes two important points. First, although it is bound by the limitations of a case study, te Riele’s research provides evidence that school wide responses to problems of classroom control have involved a shift from authoritarian to democratic practices. More research needs to be undertaken in schools to identify if this trend is more widespread. However changes to the material taught in teacher training, especially the shift in the proscribed role of the teacher from ‘information giver’ to ‘facilitator of learning’, suggests that the changes to teaching practices te Riele observed may indicate a more general trend (see Wood, 2005). Second, te Riele’s work suggests that the democratic practices utilised by the school she studied were superior to the authoritarian practices of mainstream schools, as they engaged the young people at that school in learning and helped them develop positive school careers. This finding has support from other research. For instance Noddings (2003) argues that it is necessary for teachers to build care and trust into their relations with students, not only as an end in itself, but also in order to achieve better learning and personal outcomes for students. This is also consistent with more general youth research, which emphasises the importance of trust relations in developing successful life transitions (see Wierenga, 1999).

In this paper, evidence will be given from a qualitative research undertaken in a public high school in Tasmania. Following the argument of te Riele (2006), I argue that this school employed democratic teaching practices in response to recent social and economic change. Further, evidence will be given to support the claim that democratic teaching practices have the potential to re-engage young people alienated from school and create more hopeful post-school futures for these young people. However, this paper will also outline possible negative implications of a shift from authoritarian to democratic schooling practices.
Research Background

The findings reported in this paper are from a qualitative research project conducted from mid 2006 to mid 2007 at a public high school, which I will refer to as Woodfield High. Woodfield High is situated in a small community, 40 minutes from the closest city centre. The school services a large geographical area of an approximate 25 kilometre radius, which is partly agricultural and partly commercial (Field Notes, 2006). As is the case in Tasmania more generally, the public transport servicing this area is infrequent, and consequently the young people in the area the study was conducted in experience the isolation associated with rurality, even those living within more built up areas (for more discussion of rurality see Looker & Dwyer, 1997). The area is also disadvantaged. The median weekly household income is approximately $270 below the Australian median weekly household income and the youth unemployment rate is 16.4%, compared to the national youth unemployment rate of 13% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). There is little racial-ethnic diversity, with under 5% of the population speaking a language other than English (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Twenty-eight Grade 10 young people, the four core Grade 10 teaching staff and the school’s principal participated in in-depth interviews. The participating teaching staff and principal represented a whole population sample (see Rice & Ezzy, 2005) in that all of the teachers directly related to Grade 10 were interviewed. As this was not possible with the Grade 10 students, an attempt was made to ensure that students of different ability levels and with different attitudes to school and future plans were involved in the study. The Grade 10 young people were selected in two main ways. First the entire Grade 10 student population was invited to participate in the research, and those who were willing to participate were interviewed. However the young people who were disengaged from school did not respond to this method of recruitment (only one young person from the initial 18 participants was identified as dis-engaged from school). After some discussion with the teachers and students it was discovered that formal (in particular written) and ‘catch all’ (entire population) recruiting strategies were alienating and anxiety provoking for disempowered young people, who did not feel they had anything to say, and who did not want to
say it to someone they didn’t know (Field Notes, 2006; see also Wierenga, 2001). The teachers therefore identified a number of relevant young people who had poor school attendance and performance and I approached them individually or in small groups to brief them about the research, to make myself known to them and to explain why they would be important to the research (‘you can tell us what we can do to make school better’). The young people then let their teachers know if they were interested in participating in the research.

This was a fairly unorthodox recruitment strategy, and needs greater elaboration than this paper allows. However in passing I would like to make three points. First, it is not unusual in a school situation for young people to be singled out to participate in something (think, for instance of school sporting teams, specialised classes and tests). The young people who were approached generally seemed pleased to have been singled out as important, especially given that this rarely occurred within the school’s typical day-to-day activities. Second, not all of the young people approached in the second recruitment phase put their name down to be interviewed. I think this is strong evidence that there was opportunity for those young people who wished to decline the interview to do so. Third, the young people from the second recruitment stage seemed more comfortable in the interviews, were more likely to say that they had enjoyed the interview and more reluctant to finish the interview, than those from the first recruitment stage (which is especially significant, given these were the young people who were most difficult to engage in the first place) (Field Notes, 2007). I put this increased interest and comfort down to the fact that I was able to build rapport with these young people prior to the interview. This may indicate that in some instances the conventional process is not always best. In particular the detached research role and the formal recruitment processes need to be carefully weighed up against the needs of the participating group (for further discussion of researching with disadvantaged young people see Wierenga, 2001).

The aim of the research was to understand the processes involved in young people’s engagement or disengagement with school. In-depth interviews were chosen as the main research method because I sought to understand how the way young people experience school was tied to their individual network of resources and cultural understandings of self,
school, work and future. Here I follow Raffo and Reeves (2000), who argue that in contemporary society structural forces, such as class, impact a young person in entirely new ways. They contend that prescribed social characteristics have been replaced by individualised systems of social capital, or ‘dynamic, social, spatially, culturally, temporally and economically embedded groups or networks, which have the young person at the core’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, p. 148). That is, young people are immersed in a web of social relations which both support and constrain their actions and outcomes (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). The young person exercises some choice over how this web evolves, however ‘the extent to which individual change and development can occur is heavily dependent on the way individualised systems of people evolve for each young person, which is in turn conditioned by the material and symbolic resources available to these networks’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, p. 148).

Consent was obtained from both students and parents before the interviews were undertaken. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were de-identified and kept confidential in accordance with ethics procedures. In particular, pseudonyms were provided by participants and are used in this paper. All the transcripts were imported into NVIVO and a preliminary analysis was undertaken. Initially, transcripts were coded for data that identified the ‘type’ of student the young people were, such as attitude to school, value of education, behaviour at school, etc. The interview transcripts were then compiled by NVIVO according to each code and I was able to discern patterns within and across each code. For instance within the code ‘attitudes to school’ there were those who saw school as ‘useful’, ‘a waste of time’, and ‘an escape from life’. Those who saw school as a ‘waste of time’ could then be divided into those who had links to the workforce outside of school and those that did not. This paper reports mainly on the three ‘types’ of student and the way that they engaged with school.

Research Findings

The context for change
The central premise I took to my research was that the young people’s different capacities to engage with school would reflect their different
individualised systems of social capital. I anticipated that the disciplinary practices the school utilised (which I imagined to be fairly authoritarian) would not suit all students, and so some young people would be alienated by the school system. However this premise was incorrect. In fact at Woodfield High changes were taking place, which significantly altered how school was thought of and undertaken. As Nick, the school principal, explains:

Nick: Well, this is not a school as we have traditionally known schools. We’re now more a youth centre where all the kids come, some get really engaged with learning, and some don’t. It seems to me that we have to provide lots of different choices for kids, because one model doesn’t fit all. In the old days we had one model and we said: ‘if you don’t fit that model hop off.’ Nowadays, it’s ‘you’ve got to come’ so the model has got to change.

Nick refers to the need for a new model of schooling, which he sees as inextricably linked to a change in his school’s clientele. This is not a unique position to be in. The decline of full-time unskilled labour, rising credentialism and high rates of youth unemployment have all contributed to a heightened importance of school to young people’s future life chances (see Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Smyth et al., 2002). As such, school retention has become a priority of educational professionals, politicians and parents alike. However, for this school in particular, it was becoming increasingly common for middle class parents from local areas to bypass Woodfield High for other schools up to two hours away (Field Notes, 2005). In fact, over the past five years the local bus company has had to add two specialised school bus services to accommodate students traveling to and from distant high schools (Field Notes, 2005).

According to Nick the combined forces of increased school retention and the decline in middle class enrolments have made it necessary for the school staff to change the way they go about maintaining order. As he contends:

Nick: If we tried to operate as we did 10 years ago, the school would explode under us. It just wouldn’t work.

What the teaching staff of Woodfield High have primarily noticed is that they no longer have the power over a class that they did a decade ago. Power was previously tied to authority, and now is reflected in respect.
Without respect the teachers cannot get on with their main task – teaching – and hence they have to learn how to gain the respect of this different student body. As with the teachers of te Riele’s (2006) study, the teachers of Woodfield High have learnt that what their changed student body seeks is an egalitarian relationship in which the teacher earns the right to guide each young person through learning by knowing and caring about that young person. As Nick and one of his staff, Sue, contend:

Nick: Teachers can no longer rely on being a teacher, say commanding respect, if you like. These days you earn respect. You don’t earn respect by being the kid’s friend necessarily but you need to be seen as a genuine person, a person who is interested in the kids, a person who cares for them, and it seems to me that the most able teachers become much more like a parent figure, so they have to exercise tough love, you know they understand the kids, they know the kids, but they also have to demand that the kids work, have high expectations of their work, but they also have to have some good fun with the kids, they knock around with the kids, take a bit of interest in the stuff the kids are interested in.

Sue: Well, I suppose, if I think about it I would have to say that the most important things that I think about is my relationship with [the students]. And I think, probably when it became really apparent to me was I suppose I had like a really difficult student coming into my class, and I knew he was going to be difficult, and I can’t remember what the story was, but I must have had like a family connection or something like that, that I knew something about them. On the first day I went and made some sort of personal type comment to the kid, just on their own at the start of the day, and I had that kid eating out of my hand for the rest of the year. And I think that really sort of made me realise it’s often that personal thing that makes a real difference, and I mean you don’t even have to give the kid much of your time, it’s a bit humbling really.

Nick and Sue both describe the change to their teaching practices as primarily a disciplinary, or classroom management strategy. Further, the deployment of caring and trust relations is something they know, experien-
tially, that ‘difficult’ students respond well to. To understand why this is the case, I now turn to the students’ experiences of democratic schooling.

**The advantages of democratic schooling**

Young people who are ‘good’ at schooling will respond to either an authoritarian or a democratic teaching style because they are empowered by both (Connell et al., 1982). They excel at school work, and hence earn positions of esteem within a ‘knowledge hierarchy’. In this way authoritarian school systems, based on knowledge hierarchies produce positive feedback to these students and reinforce engagement in schooling (Connell et al., 1982). For instance Beth, a highly engaged student, identifies the respect she receives from her teacher as her motivation for achieving well at school.

Beth: Yeah, like, for some teachers I like to achieve well. Like, because I like to think that they’re, they care, their teaching is really good.

Ebony: So is that why you work hard at school?

Beth: I don’t know. It’s just, like, I want to achieve well, like, I don’t want to be the lagger behind. It makes me feel good to [short laugh] achieve well so that I know that I’m doing okay for career and stuff, and I’m not struggling.

However, for a young person who does not get on at school, the absorption of information is a task that is not often easy or enjoyable. The teacher who conceives of education primarily in terms of information-giving effectively reduces the young person to their capacity to perform, and when the young person can’t perform they are defined as a ‘failure’ accordingly (see Freire, 1970). This is compared to a teacher who conceives of the young person as a person in their own right and who is able to work democratically with the young person to encourage them to have a go at learning new knowledge (see Noddings, 2003). This difference is outlined by Dooly:

Dooly: My Grade 8 teacher, the teacher I don’t like, is like ‘do it or else,’ kind of thing. Like ‘do it or you’ll get a detention …’ It was like if I didn’t know the answer I wasn’t listening or anything like that. They teach you and if you don’t learn well then they don’t care about you, sort of thing. So in Grade 8 I used
to be a kind of ‘bluhh’ [pulls bored face] kind of person, and then Grade 9 and 10, I was just completely changed, it’s good.

Ebeny: Why the change?

Dooly: Probably the teachers. The teachers I’ve got now are good. Like Mr T, you do something for him and then he’ll reward you by giving you some time at the end of the lesson to do what you want. Yeah, he gets me going [involved in work], shows me things, makes me laugh … And Mr Andrews, cause I’ve known Mr Andrews for ten years, since I’ve been here, cause he used to work on the primary side and as we came over he came over. So he knows you. He knows the way I go.

The effect of these different approaches for Dooly’s school (and personal) outcomes cannot be underestimated. The ‘complete change’ he mentions above is momentous and has significant implications for his school career and his life post school. To illustrate this more clearly Dooly provides what, according to his teachers, is a very realistic account of his school behaviour in Grade 8 (with an authoritarian teacher) and in Grade 10 (with teachers who have developed more democratic teaching relationships with Dooly):

Dooly: If a teacher gets me really really annoyed I’ll just zone out and just go somewhere else, completely schitz. Sometimes I’d just overload and explode and just say every swear word I knew, every word I had in my head. Kinda like a split personality, you know, here’s me and if someone just keeps bugging me and bugging me I’ll just schitz at em, start throwing stuff, I’d probably throw a knife if I’d had one. Just really agitate ya, and just didn’t get on well. Every day basically. Sometimes, if I got [the teacher he didn’t like] in the morning, Mum’d drop me off [at school] and I’d just go down the street to Banjos or something. Then come back about half past 10. I just didn’t like her. Now, it’s like, good. I’m a good student. Do my work, especially science with Mr T, cause we do all these projects with electricity … going well in literacy, that’s my favourite subject.

Dooly’s grades are still fairly low and he struggles to hand in his work regularly. However with support from his teachers he has re-engaged with schooling and is going on to college, with the hope of becoming an
electrician. From the young man he was in Grade 8 this is a significant achievement, and one which he accords to the different ways in which he is treated by his teachers.

Limitations of democratic schooling: the problem of responsibility
So far I have focused on the positive implications of democratic schooling. That is the fact that it produces different relations of power, based on respect, rather than authority, and hence has more opportunity to empower all students. However there are possible negative implications of this system of school control, which need to be addressed. In particular, democratic schooling practices do not have the coercive power that authoritarian schooling practices have. There is no means by which teachers can ‘make’ students do their work. Here I do not want to suggest that a student’s school work output is equivalent to their learning. For instance a young person may complete all spelling tests, but might be learning that they are a ‘bad’ speller. Likewise they may simply copy down the words and learn nothing at all. However, democratic schooling practices do require students to take greater responsibility for their own schooling than previously, when they faced detention, shaming or corporal punishment for incomplete work. As Jan, a Grade 10 teacher battling with some very alienated students, contends:

Jan: I think you can come here [to Woodfield High] and achieve, um, and I think you can come here and do nothing as well. And it seems to be, not okay, it’s never okay to do nothing, but it doesn’t seem to be the processes in order to force you to do work, um, despite yourself. I know for example at [the closest public school] they give homework and all sorts of things, whereas you don’t even attempt to give homework here because you know it’s not going to get done, and you know it’s not going to be worth the fight, like, save your battles for the classroom, sort of thing.

In particular the teachers of Woodfield High feel that the primary problem is that the students do not value education:

Jan: Sue and I were only talking about it yesterday, we were in Birchalls getting some books [for their students], with a book list. We just issue book packs out and they have no value to
them, they get lost and stuff like that within the first week, you know pens and pencils and that. Because the value of education isn’t there, and the value of learning, you know the love of learning, so it’s sort of just something they have to do, they have to come to school. They have to come to class, and some of them don’t even do that. So it is disempowering [for a teacher.]

The teachers therefore set out on the difficult path of making learning meaningful to the young people they are teaching. This is an important and useful process. However the meaning the teachers draw on is the relevance that school holds for the workforce. As Jan suggests:

Jan: [They say] ‘Why should I put the effort in when it’s hard? When all of these years it hasn’t worked for me, so why now? Why should I do it now? Cause you’re telling me to? No, that’s not gonna [be enough], [you] don’t have that much power.’ So it had to be like, ‘Well you’re going to need this in the workplace and that’s why.’

This makes intuitive sense. The school is dealing with a student body that, largely, would have been out in the workforce by Grade 10 a decade ago, and are still planning on ‘getting out’ as soon as possible. Therefore making a link between school and work is a significant way to engage young people in school activities. In many cases this is effective. For instance one young man, Clayton, receives an apprenticeship from his work experience and the school supports this by allowing him to undertake practical classes relevant to the trade he is entering. That is, he studies maths and literacy as it applies to the practical work he will be undertaking. This re-engages Clayton in learning, to some extent.

Ebeny: What would you say you liked about this school?
Clayton: I don’t know it’s just, a lot more practical than others, I reckon.
Ebeny: So you thought it was good?
Clayton: Yeah.
Ebeny: Did you learn a lot from it?
Clayton: What practical stuff? Yeah, lot more than theory.
[With theory] all you do is just sit there and write stuff on the board. Us, well every time I had to do it, you don't read it, you just write it.

There are several reasons why this strategy of making school meaningful through linking it to the workforce is both advantageous and problematic (White & Wyn, 2004). This is not a debate I wish to enter here. Rather, I wish to return to the problem of young people being required to take more responsibility for their own schooling within a democratic school system, and the solution the teachers of Woodfield High have adopted, namely making school meaningful to young people through demonstrating the school’s link to the workforce. This is effective (more or less) only when students have an understanding of what they would like to do when they leave school. For those young people who do not have a future work plan this type of meaning making is not only ineffective, but also alienating. It requires the young person to imagine a future pathway in order to engage with school. This is particularly difficult for young people who have experienced life as chaotic and who are just trying to survive the present; young people like Kirsty.

Kirsty has recently moved to the area, has experienced consistent tension between friends, frequently discusses leaving home to escape family life and intermittently uses drugs. Kirsty understands that she needs to take an active role in planning and organising her life to avoid future disadvantage. However she can’t imagine her acting on the world to be successful because her experience of life has been chaotic.

Kirsty: In 10 years whether I’m a bludger or have a family or ended up with kids I didn’t really want, it’s just a reflection on what I was when I was younger, like I should have planned more, but I don’t.

Ebeny: Why do you think that is? What stops you?

Kirsty: I don’t know what stops me, I just don’t see the point of planning for something when it could all just not happen, like you just waste all the time working towards it and then in the end you can just think like I should have enjoyed being a kid as much as possible.
The necessity to take ownership of their future and to take responsibility of schooling is frustrating and debilitating for young people like Kirsty. The school requires a certain type of cultural capital (in this case future planning) which only young people with certain types of social resources have (see Raffo & Reeves, 2000). However, as indicated by the above example, unawareness of future planning and goal setting is viewed as a personal failure by the young people involved, rather than a cultural disadvantage. They feel the loss of their disengagement with schooling, but are not in a position to change this. In extreme instances this feeling of disadvantage results in the young people seeking more coercive means of school discipline, that is, a return to authoritarian schooling. As Tim explains:

Ebeny: So how would you like to see this school disciplining you?

Tim: What do you call it, the cane thing? I reckon they should bring that back.

Ebeny: Why do you think that would work?

Tim: Worked on my Pop.

Ebeny: Really?

Tim: [Grins.] That’s what he says.

Ebeny: Would you like to go to school with someone who’s going to cane you if you don’t work though?

Tim: Yeah, cause it would make you work wouldn’t it. And I’d rather more work, cause I want a good education.

**Conclusion**

As classic studies by Willis (1977) and Connell and colleagues (1982) have shown, authoritarian teaching practices are disempowering for young people and can lead to their alienation from school. This is especially likely when the young person involved does not receive the respect that other students have been accorded as a result of mastery of school knowledge (see Connell et al., 1982). Alienation from school is always problematic,
but this is particularly true of the current socio-economic context, in which school credentials have become increasingly important to labour market success, and hence to a young person’s future opportunities.

In this paper qualitative evidence from a case study of a Tasmanian public high school has been presented to substantiate the claim by te Riele (2006) that democratic schooling practices based on care and personal support for students are more effective at engaging young people in school than authoritarian teaching practices. Findings presented here suggest that young people at Woodfield High resist authoritarian teaching practices because they do not accept the power accorded to teachers as legitimate. Treating young people as worthy of respect and showing concern for their futures is a means for teachers to earn respect, and hence have legitimate power to teach, without resistance. Democratic schooling practices are empowering because they treat each young person as an individual of equal importance as their peers, rather than allotting esteem hierarchically according to school performance. This is somewhat similar to Noddings’ finding that young people seek to be treated foremostly as human beings (2003).

Given this evidence, I contend that democratic schooling practices are superior to authoritarian schooling practices, and need to be explored as strategies to re-engage young people alienated from school. However, the case study I report here also produced evidence to suggest that some young people were disadvantaged by democratic schooling. Those disadvantaged include young people who did not have the cultural capital or previous experience to enable them to develop future career goals and to identify how they needed to use schooling to reach these goals. Democratic schooling practices do not have the coercive capacities of authoritarian schooling. Democratic schooling, therefore, requires young people to take responsibility for their own school careers and to utilise school in a career-directed and individual manner. This means democratic schooling creates problems of its own, for example, it encourages instrumentalism (see White & Wyn, 2004). However most significant here is the fact that it disadvantages particular groups of young people.
References


