‘TROUBLING’ BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT: LISTENING TO STUDENT VOICE

Janean Robinson

“This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University”

Year of submission; 2011
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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(Your name)
ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the 21st century, education is increasingly being privatised at the expense of the public. This can be explained in terms of the neoliberal agenda, with its emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, accountability and standards and the damaging impact it is having on all aspects of school life. As governments abdicate responsibility for public education, schools are exposed to the forces of market competition, choice and individual performance rather than the collective public good serving the needs of all students.

This research investigates how students who do not conform, fit in, or help maintain a commodified image of the school, are often left on the margins, resist, or leave school altogether. It is these students specifically who become the focus of system wide attempts to homogenise behaviour in ways that are mostly demeaning and unhelpful. In particular, this thesis critiques the mandated Behaviour Management in Schools (2001, 2008) policy of the Western Australia Department of Education and Training by listening to the voices of students themselves and what they have to say about life in a Western Australian public secondary school. In the process, the thesis: highlights the lack of respectful consultation and negotiation with teachers, parents and students in the creation of behaviour management policy, protocols and rules; challenges the deficit and pathologising thinking that underpins it; and identifies an alternative vision based on the values of trust, respect, and care.

Drawing on the tradition of critical ethnography, twenty-seven Year 10 students were interviewed to better understand the contradiction between official policy discourses and their own daily experiences of behaviour management policies, routines and habits.
Official policy claims of creating a safe, welcoming and caring school environment are contrasted with student narratives which illustrate their concerns and struggles with inequality, and a desire for respect and voice in a system that often appears harsh and unfair. The analysis of these narratives, together with a genealogical investigation of the historical evolution of behaviour management discourses in Western Australia, sheds light on some of the reasons why students resist and disengage from schooling. The emergent themes selected from the narrative student portraits provide a focus of discussion: student voice - ‘they just won’t listen’; disengagement - ‘I am bored’; control - ‘they wear me down’; marginalisation - ‘I feel left out’; relationships - ‘can or can’t we relate’; and powerlessness - ‘when they don’t care’.

The alternative understandings that emerge from student insights and perspectives together with a critical theoretical orientation provide the foundations for building a more democratic and socially just approach to schooling. This alternative archetype is based on a vision of emotional and social connectedness and the principles of trust, care and respect nourishing pedagogical hope. Such a learning community has no ‘end place’ and no ‘product’ but instead is built on a spirit of belonging and negotiation and is not afraid to be bathed in affection, and authentic conversations.

The ultimate purpose of this thesis is to provoke and ‘trouble’ Behaviour Management in Schools policy in order to instigate a more meaningful dialogue about the social, economic and educational futures of all young people.
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Many people are involved in a final edition that the author, after much sweat and trepidation finally relinquishes to the outside. Thus, when attempting to acknowledge these people for their valuable time, energy, experience and expertise, one always runs the risk of inevitably missing someone. I therefore want to begin by acknowledging the young people whose voices inspired and enabled this research to begin, grow and develop into a story. I have been motivated by them to tell this story via a representative group of twenty seven Year 10 students who willingly shared their understandings of a policy likely to have a major impact on many more students in the future. Their voices have captured the representation of many in high schools who struggle with issues of compliance and conformity in neoliberal times.

I also wish to thank the Principal, administration and teaching staff of Anchorage High for providing me the opportunity to speak with this group of young people.

I could never have finished, let alone begin this writing journey without the continued support and belief in my ability to tell the story. My family and friends have been my spinal cord and sounding board during this process.

I have been guided throughout this educational journey by a true mentor who I had the great fortune to meet from the beginning of this research path when completing my Bachelor of Education back in 1997. I was at the time disillusioned in my own potential and capacity as a continuing educator in difficult times. Professor Barry Down quietly, unassumingly and patiently created a safe space as I adopted the skills and confidence to understand research and weave together a story that revealed important issues around
the impact of policy in the lives of teachers and young people in schools. His professional, sincere and purposeful approach makes him a living treasure in this work and an inspiration for many of us in our quest to make changes in schools based on relationships. My assistant supervisors, Dr Peter Wright and Dr James Bell have overseen and encouraged me through many of the challenges of embarking on this form of research. Without the support of such supervisors I would not have found the smoother path to express myself with these words confidently so as to piece this important research together into a comprehensive whole.

The professional support from staff and fellow postgraduate colleagues from the School of Education at Murdoch University has been sincerely appreciated during the past five years and I will always hold dear the moments of fun and encouragement from ‘deep down under’ (in the dungeon) at EH1.002. I would also like to thank Carl Holroyd and Ross Lantzke for their technical assistance.

A PhD comprises much more than this final edition – it is also the journey of releasing dreams, introspection and memories. It is because of this that I would like to dedicate this thesis to the brave young people who spoke on behalf of the many that were silenced before them and whose imaginations have the freedom to speak lucidly long into the future.
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASHS</td>
<td>Anchorage Senior High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMaD</td>
<td>Behaviour Management and Discipline</td>
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<td>BMIS</td>
<td>Behaviour Management in Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>BMP</td>
<td>Behaviour Management Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMIS</td>
<td>Classroom Management in Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMS</td>
<td>Classroom Management Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFS</td>
<td>Classroom First Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>HREC</td>
<td>Human Research Ethics Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual Education Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>S&amp;E</td>
<td>Society and Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIS</td>
<td>Student Information System</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSTUWA</td>
<td>State School Teachers Union of Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>WADET</td>
<td>Western Australian Department of Education and Training (Formally also known as Education Department of WA, The Ministry of Education of WA, Department of Education of WA and since 2010, known as WA Department of Education).</td>
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