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# **School Connectedness: Student Voices Examine Power and Subjectivity**

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## **School Connectedness: Student Voices Examine Power and Subjectivity**

Ideally, school would be a place where all students felt that they belonged.<sup>1</sup> However, the reality is that many students feel as though they do not belong to their school community. Alienated or disaffected students are an endemic problem in schools in Australia, affecting the whole school community, as well as life chances for the students themselves after school.<sup>2</sup> The crux of this matter, we believe, are the tensions between the desire to connect to the school community, and the frustration experienced by some students as a result of their subjectification by the school system. By subjectification, we mean the ways in which power is negotiated in people's lives so that they become certain types of people located within identifiable power structures. One of the ideas regarding student experiences about school that this work examines is the thought that perhaps students that we tend to identify as alienated or disaffected in their schools may be resisting the accepted negotiations of power that underpin the school system. In part, the students have a tacit awareness of their subjectivity that they find frustrating as schools are built on the rhetoric of agency and autonomy. This article probes the issue of power relations within a school, and student reaction to what Foucault would term their 'subjectification'.<sup>3</sup>

This article draws on research done as part of a larger study. The article focuses on student responses to the issue of connectedness within a secondary school. By

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge Dr. Judith MacCallum of Murdoch University for her thoughtful feedback and advice in preparing this article. We also wish to acknowledge the helpful advice of the reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *National Evaluation Report: Full Service Schools Programme 1999 and 2000*, 2001, p.12

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1982 p.208

connectedness, we mean the ways and places that students feel an affiliation with their school community. These feelings of connectedness to school are a dynamic, evolving set of experiences dependant upon a variety of unique circumstances for each student. In particular, this article looks at responses of some students who have been identified in various ways as exhibiting behaviours that demonstrate some form of disconnection to their school community. This is not an attempt to compare these students with others, rather, it is an attempt to problematise our understanding of terms such as connectedness in schools. Through looking at these student responses, a better understanding of the different realities that students experience in a school situation will emerge. This will have implications for schools as they attempt to implement strategies to promote positive school experiences for all students. A Foucaultean framework has been utilised to analyse student responses to their experiences of connectedness.

Connectedness allows students to feel positive about their educational experiences within the context of their educational institution. While there are multiple factors that can contribute to a student's feeling of being either connected or alienated, the purpose of this article is to look at connectedness and alienation as a contingent experience, rather than an emotional place.

### **About the Study**

Connectedness is a phrase used increasingly in schools in the new millennia.<sup>4</sup> Linked as it is to the notion of resiliency in learners, connectedness has become a way of demonstrating how well a school is servicing its client base, and working to create a

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Op Cit.* pp.16-18

community that all learners, regardless of their life experiences, feel a sense of belonging. Our study rose from a perception that perhaps we tend to see connectedness as a fixed, monolithic space that students arrive at, whereas it is more likely to be a contested space, complete with tensions and shifting perceptions from various stakeholder groups within schools. As a result, this article addresses some student responses to connectedness .

### **About the Site**

Power, subjectivity and connectedness are universal constructs within schools. This is not to say that they are the same in each school, rather that in each school there are characters, flavours and tensions within each of these constructs that make it unique. The school chosen is “Church” College, a relatively new Uniting Church school situated in the urban fringe of a major city in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Church is a K – 12 school that has been operating since 1997. The school has around 600 students and it continues to grow. Currently, the school is experiencing around 15% growth in student population each year. One of the attractive things about Church is its newness; we were able to investigate power relationships at a formative time for a new school. Church also prides itself on being able to be innovative in education because of its newness.

The drawing area for the school population has the following demographic characteristics. There are approximately 97,500 people in the area, of which 85% are Australian citizens.<sup>6</sup> The region is defined as being of low to medium socio-economic

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<sup>5</sup> “Church” is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the site. The names of the students have also been changed, using pseudonyms that the students chose themselves.

<sup>6</sup> KIEP Schools and Demographics, [Website] <http://www.kiceeiec.com/schools/html> Date Accessed 06/10/02

status, with 23% of the population holding tertiary qualifications.<sup>7</sup> It is expected that the population of the region will grow by about 30% by 2006.<sup>8</sup> Housing prices are low, although there has been a recent surge in prices as the Freeway access has made it more attractive to people commuting to the city.<sup>9</sup> The youth unemployment rate for the area is approximately 11.1%, whilst the overall unemployment rate is 10.5%.<sup>10</sup> This represents a significantly lower youth unemployment rate than the national average of 20.5%, whilst the overall unemployment rate for the area is higher than the national average of 6.5%.<sup>11</sup> Of the 15% of the regional population who are not Australian citizens, 5% speak a language other than English at home.<sup>12</sup> 2% of the population are Aboriginal.<sup>13</sup> Heavy industry is the main employer in the area along with growing industries such as shipbuilding and hi-tech industries.<sup>14</sup>

Church College's Vision Statement is important as it codifies the values and attitudes that underpin the institution and its community. This document provides a useful context for looking at how the College values its students connecting to the school. The opening sentences that are in a bold typeface in the text of the Vision Statement read as follows:

Church College is building an accessible and inclusive community in which students are educated to discover and realise the excellence within themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Real Estate Institute of Western Australia [Website] <http://www.reiwa.com.au> Date Accessed 29/10/02.

<sup>10</sup> KIEP *Op Cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Website] 4221.0 Schools Australia <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs.../> Date accessed 06/10/02.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Within the values of the Uniting Church in Australia, it is developing people of conscience who play a responsible role in creating sustainable compassionate communities.<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting that the Foundation Council and Executive of Church developed a vision for the school as being instrumental in educating individuals who are able to “play a responsible role in creating sustainable, compassionate communities.” This tacitly underscores Church College's interest in its students feeling connected to the larger social world.

### **Connectedness and its Significance**

As has been stated earlier, education is one of the most significant experiences of people in the Western world. Schools as institutions have a variety of different roles. Firstly, they exist as a means to shape identity and stratify society.<sup>16</sup> They also exist as tools to create a disciplinary society, that is, as tools that generally reproduce rather than reconstruct society.<sup>17</sup> Schools exist as social institutions that prioritise certain truths. They exist as places that perpetuate those truths seen to be core values of Western culture. In short, schools are “always transformative in their impact on the lives of individuals”.<sup>18</sup> The complex challenges confronting both students and school leavers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are becoming of increasing concern to many education policy makers and educators as they seek to identify forms of pedagogy that will serve the best interests of the students and the larger society.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Church College “Vision Statement and Goals” in *Church College Handbook*, Baldvis 2002

<sup>16</sup> Colin Symes and Noel Preston, *Schools and Classrooms: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Education*, Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman Pty. Ltd., 1997. p.3

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.xii

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Op Cit.* p.12

In a rapidly changing society, students who do not complete their education run the risk of being severely disadvantaged in the future. Worse than this, this disadvantage could continue for each successive generation. With the current generational change in the job market, many students are denied the traditional job or apprenticeship opportunities that have previously existed. As a result, they now tend to stay in schools until the end of Year Twelve. The age participation rate for 17-year olds in secondary schooling in Australia has increased from 56.9% in 1991 to 62.2% in 2001.<sup>20</sup> As this trend continues, schools will play an even more important role in providing young people with a sense of belonging to a community. Feelings of connectedness are significant in that they enable students to identify with a small community, and through this, to engage with the wider community.

Connectedness is a key facet in student resilience. It is argued that students who failed to connect to their schools were less likely to complete Year Twelve at their school. This experience of disconnectedness has the potential to derail the state's avocation of education as a prime factor in creating a skilled workforce able to meet the expected demands of the new millennium. It is argued that schools "have a central role in enabling young people to develop resilience".<sup>21</sup> The idea of connectedness owes much of its current popularity to the concept of resilience in students. Put simply, pedagogists wondered why some students were able to "'bounce back' from environmental stresses" whilst others went on to develop problematic behaviour. The argument has been that

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<sup>20</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Op Cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Symes and Preston *Op Cit.* p.17



resilience is important in creating the kind of lifelong learners that the rapidly shifting job-market in the global economy requires.<sup>22</sup>

Connectedness is central to the claim of resilience because research has suggested that a resilient learner is one who is connected at various levels of their schooling. Fuller suggested that there were four main factors of connectedness. They are peer connectedness, fitting in at school, an experience of love from a family unit that helped the young person understand themselves better, and a significant relationship with an adult outside the family unit, often a teacher.<sup>23</sup> Fuller and others argue that connectedness to family, to an area, to a friendship group or to a school is crucial in creating the resilient learners that society requires.

One of the principles that supports the concept of resilience is that there is a social cost that early school leavers represent. The Dusseldorf Skills Forum estimated that the cost to the Australian economy of students who do not have the skills and/or motivation to join the workforce is \$2.6 billion dollars for each year's cohort.<sup>24</sup> The report was equally alarmed at research that suggested that 1 in 6 young people was in danger of being unable to make a transition from education to work. Whilst this notion of assigning a monetary cost to social issues is appealing to many in government, I would argue that there stands a range of other imperatives such as social, moral and developmental, that co-exist with

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> A. Fuller, *From Surviving to Thriving: Promoting Mental Health in Young People*, Acer, Melbourne, 1998 p.77

<sup>24</sup> Department of Education *Op Cit.* p.26

financial considerations to ensure that there is an education system capable of recognising and meeting a variety of student needs.

### **Foucault: Power and Subjectivity**

In order to examine the concept of connectedness, we advocate thinking of schools as institutions set up by the state to create the individual as object; to define, to label, to categorise. In later works, Foucault coined the phrase “governmentality” to describe how the ‘art of government’ changed as the problem of an increasing population forced the state to alter its tactics. Foucault puts it this way:

The tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on; thus the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality.<sup>25</sup>

The ponderous shift in the art of government equates with the moment that the individual becomes ‘known’. One of the contributions that Foucault has made to our understanding has been his equivalence of knowledge as a form of power. By asking when the individual becomes known, what we are really asking is when does the individual become a thing, an object, a site where power is deployed and discourses such as connectedness contested. When Foucault is asked to explain what the rationale of his work has been, he wrote: “My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.”<sup>26</sup> The subjectification of the individual Foucault believes, is one of the central strategies

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, “Governmentality” in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Eds): *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1991, p.103

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault “Afterward” *Op Cit.* p.208

deployed by society in its programme of ‘disciplining’ the society. As Foucault states: “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals: it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals as both objects and as instruments of its exercise.”<sup>27</sup> Within the school, the rhetoric, practice and deployment of discipline is constant. In light of this theoretical position, we believe that connectedness is a tool that works on the individual and makes them ‘known’ to the state, or as the case may be, the institutions of the state such as schools.

Schools act to normalise the individual – an important process in its subjectification. Foucault often refers to the institutions of prisons, “the army, the school, and the hospital” as sites where these technologies of power can be found.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Foucault maintained that part of this process of normalisation was the way that the individual became complicit in his or her own subjectivity. Foucault labelled this the “technology of the self”, the “particular type of discourse and the particular techniques that reveal our deepest selves”.<sup>29</sup>

If we think about schools, there are so many sites for potential conflict within the relationships that the students find themselves in, with peer groups, teachers, parents and the executive administration of the school all having significant input into the way a student identifies with their school. For this reason, it is no wonder that some students feel like outsiders. Issues such as discipline, homework, teacher-student relationships, as well as the important external factors to education such as socio-economic status and

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Penguin Books, London, 1991 p.170

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p.136

<sup>29</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow *Op Cit.* p.174

parent aspirations for their children, all contribute to how well a student is able to find relevance in their educational experience. In addition, pedagogists need to consider where the student experience is located within the institution; muted, decentred and subjected to a variety of complex power relations that demand a certain set of responses from the student.

We believe that there is an irony in that schools function on the rhetoric of freedom, of choice, of agency whilst in practice the power relations that are deployed make this rhetoric largely improbable. Students can respond to this rhetoric in a bewildered way. As can be seen later, this presents issues for students. We would argue that this bewilderment can result in feelings of disconnectedness from the school, and a sense of frustration at the feelings of isolation that follow.

### **Methodology**

The wider study utilised a qualitative research paradigm. Using focus group research, key stakeholder groups of students, teachers, parents and administrators, were asked a common set of questions that addressed experiences and attitudes towards connectedness. All of the participants came from one school community, with the students being in Year Eleven. There were four student focus groups, two staff focus groups, two parent focus groups and one school executive focus group. Each group had three participants.

This article focuses on the responses of three students, Bruce, Penelope and Odette, from one focus group. The students were selected using purposive sampling, that is, they were selected because of attributes that they seemed to share. This was a focus group of

students who appeared the most disaffected from their school, determined by their school record of detention and suspension. The responses of the ‘disaffected’ group are central to this article and these responses will be considered in detail. Through this, we will gain a richer understanding of connectedness, particularly the student responses to issues of power and subjectivity in schools.

## **Results**

This focus group of students was identified as those students who appeared to be the most disaffected. Based on a subjective assessment, the two females and one male who made up this focus group, were selected because of a combination of school records suggesting frequent forms of conflict with the school, evidence of frequent school sanctions applied and also evidence of conflicts from previous school’s experience of these students. All of this information meant that the students could be labelled as those likely to be feeling disconnected from their school community. These students were either those who appeared most frequently on after school detention, or those who had been suspended from the college in the 18 months prior to the interview. One of the things that was apparent was how enthusiastically they responded to the questions asked, perhaps because they appreciated the experience of being heard and the feeling that their responses were significant.

Perhaps the most obvious response of this group was that they generally did not feel connected to the school community, or that there were only certain sections of the

community that they identified with. When asked if he felt connected to the school, Bruce replied:

*I feel like I am chained to the school. I feel like I am more connected to the people.*

The people that Bruce referred to were his peers. In his view, the staff were a part of the structure of the school, in opposition to the community represented by the students. The teachers represented his 'chaining', as he felt that their behaviour and expectations separated them from the students, and effectively caused conflict and student alienation. Bruce's view of the role of the teacher is about his experience of power relations within the school. What subsequently emerges is a frustration with the structure of the school including the staff.

Bruce, Odette and Penelope did not respond well to the role of the staff in their education. When asked about experiences of exclusion from the school community, Odette gave the following example:

*There are the teacher's pets, and then there are the other people. I am one of the other people. They [the pets] get more recognition and they get more opportunities. The teachers don't treat you the same as everyone else. The other girls always seem better than me, and I hate that, because it feels like the teachers and the other students are putting me down.*

It is not surprising to find this group resisting the role of authority in their education. Odette, and Bruce before her, are saying that within the power relationships that permeate schools, there are different types of people, not just in terms of occupation as a teacher or a student, but that there are different kinds of both teachers and students who are

expected to behave in certain ways in certain places. One of the major experiences that they were unhappy with was what they saw as an invasion of their privacy by the teachers. They believed that teachers would construct them as certain types of students that they did not agree with. As Church is a small school, they felt that they had no freedom to express themselves without their teachers finding out. Odette said that:

*Teachers gossip about this kid and they all, for instance in Year Nine and Year Ten, there was a party, and all the teachers know about it. [The teachers] have got nothing to do with it, we are out of school.*

Penelope mirrored these feelings when she said:

*There is a lot of interference from the teachers with our lives.*

Implicit in both of these student responses is the understanding that certain types of behaviours construct certain types of people through disciplining processes, and these people are treated according to how they are perceived within the power structures around them. These students felt that it was these judgements and actions of the staff that harmed their sense of community in the school. We would also argue that what Penelope is articulating is a frustration between the rhetoric of the responsible adolescent that permeates schools and other institutions in Western culture and the reality of schools as places where control and discipline are exerted. In many ways this frustration, We would argue, is born out of a realisation that their maturity does not correspond with the autonomy that they feel entitled to. The student voices are located within the tensions that underpin the school system, and point to the idea that schools struggle with negotiations of power. There can be a tendency to see power operating in the school as a line from the

Principal to the teachers to the students at the bottom of the pile. However, we need to see schools as places where power operates at all levels – teachers themselves are subjectified by various demands and expectations. To students, schools can appear to operate as very closed structures in terms of their values, attitudes and expectations where some students felt that they were the victims. Perhaps it is better to see the school as a place where power permeates all levels of the structure, and carry with it values, attitudes and expectations that normalise what being a teacher, a parent, a student should be.

This point is further demonstrated by Odette. Odette asserted that:

*There is a community feeling. If only the teachers would get over how much older than us they are. More like trying to get a connection with us.*

One of the key responses articulated by the participants revealed a desire for belonging, for affiliation, for feeling connected to their school community. However, this desire was always offset by other tensions and struggles within their school experience. In this sense, we would argue that Odette is situating herself within a matrix of power, and questioning why the school reality exists as it does, particularly when the reality lived by students appears to contradict the rhetoric of empowerment. For these students, their experience of the College was dominated by their peer groups, and a feeling that the staff were intruding into their community. It was not that they would not allow staff into their community; it was more that they resisted a sense of community in which there was a power hierarchy that placed them at the lower end of the scale. Bruce said:



*Some teachers are allowed into our group, into our community, but other teachers just don't want to be there. They say "Your community is broken up".*

What seemed to separate the two types of teachers in the eyes of these three students was their power relationships with the students. In this quote, Bruce is saying that there is an ideal of community that operates in schools imposed on the students. While Bruce felt that he belonged to a community with his peers, he felt that this community was perceived as being threatening to the staff, and as such, attempts were made to disband it because it did not agree with the staff's concept of community. In this sense, Bruce's experience suggested that some forms of community were normalised, whilst others were not. Some teachers, Bruce believed, actively worked to recognise the importance of the students' thoughts and opinions in shaping their school community, and this allowed students like Bruce to feel connected. However, they saw other teachers actively worked to silence and ignore student voices. Penelope said that when she felt that there was a community that she belonged to, it was when:

*We are on the same level as the teachers and that is what helps to create the co-operation any community needs.*

However, when she felt alienated from the school community, it was when:

*It is the old authority thing where you have got the teacher higher than the student.*

Connectedness is a contingent space, and there were significant experiences that these students had that created a feeling of connectedness. The co-curricular programme of the school outside of the normal school day was important in contributing to the feelings of connectedness of these students. For Bruce what was significant was his ability to bring

a particular performance skill that he had to Church Day, and perform it in front of the school. Because he had not participated in any other activity for Church, this gave him a sense of community that he had not really shared in before.

*I don't do anything for the school, then we had Church Day, that [performance] made me feel like a connection thing not just an outsider.*

Penelope commented that it was her experience in the band that gave her a feeling of connectedness.

*I am in the band, I have been involved with them out of school. It made me feel more connected to the school. We have got a lot of recognition from the places, we are a good band.*

For these students, feelings of connectedness corresponded very closely to the opportunities for the student to experience success, to be visible where that visibility created a positive exchange between the student and those elements of the school from which they desired acceptance. We would argue that these student responses reveal a desire for acceptance from the hierarchy of the schools such as the teachers, and that many expressions of their antisocial behaviour could probably be located in their frustration at their needs not being realised. This point is highlighted by Odette's attitude towards teachers. What connected Odette to the school were her relationships with teachers. She said:

*Connection with the teacher is a big thing that gives you connection to the school.*

It is interesting that one of the things that the students nominated as a positive was that they liked the fact that it was ‘small and personal’. Penelope felt that one of the positives was that:

*It is smaller than any other school and the teachers give more personal attention to you. They care more about you and things.*

She liked the idea that in a small school she was more visible, when that visibility resulted in her having positive interactions with the staff. Like Odette, Penelope’s relationships with staff were crucial to her feeling connected to the school.

When asked what things that they could improve, Odette commented that many people in the school seemed to undervalue the experiences of the students.

*Because when you think about it the school is for the student, you can’t have a school without the students. We [staff and students] should work together.*

When a student such as Odette looked at the school around her, and her place within that institution, we would argue that what caused her behaviour in part was a resistance to her normalisation within the hierarchy that underpins the school community. This was particularly evident because she felt marginalised by that hierarchy. This makes sense, when a student felt that they were located at the top of the hierarchy, for however brief a period, they felt as if they were being validated within the school community and felt connected. However, the problem with a hierarchy within a school is that for every student who feels validated, there are probably a number who feel threatened and isolated, and this order is constantly being shaped and contested.

When asked why it was important to feel connected to their school community, this group found it difficult to formulate an answer. After a long silence, Bruce, articulated a very powerful position:

*It should be “This is my school”.*

These students wanted to belong, but they often felt that by belonging they were forced to hand important vestiges of their limited autonomy. Too often, these students felt that they were being victimised by power relationships that were unfair and inexplicable. Rather than feeling a part of their community, these students felt that the ways that power was deployed often had the express intention to single them out in a negative way. These students wanted to belong, but they felt that at times they were deliberately and calculatingly excluded. One of the things that really frustrated them was that they felt that they were unfairly denied opportunities that other students had because they appeared to be tough or confident. These feelings resulted in Odette saying;

*They said I was intimidating because I was confident. They didn't want to know how I was intimidated, how I was targeted.*

These experiences of power relationships actively worked to prevent a sense of a shared community, between staff and student, and were a barrier to these students feeling connected.

What the participants articulated through their responses was their experience of certain forms of institutional power. These discourses then, are significant because they exist within a fabric of power relationships. In a sense, discourse is what perpetuates the social

basis of power within a specific institution or concept.<sup>30</sup> Discourses are made up of discursive practices that “refer to the rules by which discourses are formed, rules that govern what can be said and what must remain unsaid, who can speak with authority and who can listen”.<sup>31</sup> One of the key findings is that the students themselves are aware of the discursive practices that underpin the school as a social institution. They are aware of power being used and manipulated at all levels and by all groups within the school context. The students responded to this utilisation of power in varying ways, and with varying degrees of hostility and/or acceptance. In general, this could perhaps best be summarised as a contest between the desire to be treated as autonomous individuals and the desire to be a member of a community where the concept of the individual is normalised.

All of the students in some way resisted what they saw as a misuse of power. Church was a school similar to many in Australia that operated on a sliding scale of discipline, ranging from informal, classroom discipline to more formal sanctions such as detention after school, suspension, and finally, expulsion. Suspension was seen as a very serious form of sanction used to combat serious infractions. Only the principal could suspend a student. In 2002, Odette was suspended for one week for bullying other female students. When she returned from suspension, her enrolment became conditional upon her continued good behaviour. When Odette was asked what she disliked about Church, her response focussed on how as a student she felt that her actions were continually under scrutiny from the staff, and that these actions were judged according to a morality that

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<sup>30</sup> Peter McLaren *Life In Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*. Longman Incorporated, New York 1989. p.180

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

she may not have necessarily shared. Not only this, she felt that the ways that she was judged functioned to isolate and silence her within the school community. She stated that:

*Last year when there was that big bitchiness and I was on suspension, they had a big discussion and they said that they did not want me there. I hated the most how all the girls were saying how I intimidated them, but [the staff and students] never got my side of the story. They judged me on their preconceived impressions. There were others who were intimidating, but I just got singled out.*

This issue served to demonstrate how Odette felt victimised and disadvantaged by the power relationships that occurred around her. In this example, we believe she felt victimised by this discussion because, without being given an opportunity to defend herself due to her suspension, she was rendered powerless. She felt that she was being denied a fair and reasonable place within the power structure, and it was this silence that most alienated her from her school community. The most threatening thing for Odette in her absence was that she felt that the staff of the school had actively attempted to coerce her peers to judge her in an overt, public forum. Also, in this instance we believe that Odette was upset because the negotiated power relationships between staff and students had been subverted with the direct intention of discussing her. She felt that this was not a fair and reasonable way for power to be deployed as it unfairly singled her out, and on a deeper level, we believe that it did not correspond with how she perceived power should work in the school. In effect she was disciplined by the various discourses surrounding her.

All three of the students had similar experiences. For Bruce it was an occasion where he was blamed for another two students fighting. Like Odette, Bruce was frustrated that the power deployed silenced and separated him from his peers.

*When M and A had a fight, they sent me out of the classroom and into the office, and the staff said to the other students; “You can’t say this to Bruce but we don’t like him, he is a ringleader, you people would be getting straight A’s if it wasn’t for him”. I felt disgusted just to hear that, it was them that closed the door on any chance I had to belong to their community.*

Bruce and Odette were silenced to an extent, because of the need for control and order within the school system. In a sense, these students were seen to have a lot of power over their peers, and perhaps it is their potential to be active within the school that can lead them into conflict with the negotiated power relations. Penelope reinforced this when she said, with some resentment:

*The fact is that if you do something everybody knows about it. Even if it is good or bad, there is no way of hiding it.*

These power relationships that the students most resisted were not necessarily restricted to the staff. Penelope also spoke about how the peer group worked to endorse or sanction particular behaviours:

*Some people make you feel like you belong, some make you feel like they are better than you.*

As the above example with Odette demonstrated, the students were aware that both the staff and students had their own largely mutually exclusive power codes and expectations. When these two groups were perceived to be blurring the accepted

boundaries and targeting a particular student or group, the students targeted felt victimised because the normal power rules had been altered, and it appeared to apply only to them.

The students understood that they were both subjected to complex power relationships and had some role in maintaining these complex power relationships, particularly amongst their peers. They saw this as being 'normal'. However, they resented it when someone or something upset their understanding of how power should operate and be deployed within the school community. Part of the reason that they resented it is because it represented the use of power through the institution that served to separate individuals and isolate them from their peer communities, to place them in a hierarchy according to how they were perceived by the staff and their peers. For these students, their experience of power relationships could be negative. However, where power relationships served to locate the student within some form of positive frame, it worked to make the same student feel included. In short, these students could feel either alienated or connected depending on how well their treatment in the school agreed with their notions of where they fitted in. Later in the focus group, Odette commented on how she perceived other people's success would work to include them:

*What is really good and promotes community, if someone does something really good in this school, people find out about it. It encourages you to get involved because of the recognition.*

It is interesting that Odette speaks almost wistfully about the recognition other people get, rather than what she has received.



Bruce, Penelope and Odette have expectations of the power relationships that occur in schools. Put simply, this expectation returns to the concept of fair and normal deployment of power within the school by the staff and students in particular. Going back through the student voices, a sense of what the students think is fair and normal emerges. They thought that it was normal and fair for students to be treated equally, for students and staff to work together and for students to be free from being compared to other students. They thought that it was fair and normal for students to have a voice to defend themselves, and opportunities for success and to feel as if they belonged and were as important as any other student. They did not think it was normal and fair for teachers to overstep their roles in the power structure by upsetting relationships amongst student groups. They did not think it was fair and normal for teachers to act as though they were superior to the students or to be judged by teacher gossip. It is interesting to note that what the students think is normal and fair correspond very closely with what Church's vision of a school community is as outlined in the Vision Statement.

## **Conclusion**

When we think about students who appear to be disconnected or disaffected at schools, there is a tendency to focus on the behaviours rather than the causes. We would argue that connectedness, or the desire to feel as though they belong and are significant to a school community, is an important set of experiences in every student's life, regardless of their apparent attitude and behaviour. While schools continue to see connectedness as a fixed, monolithic totality that is judged as the connected/disconnected student, potential opportunities are being missed to improve school life for many students. One of the

motivations for this article is a desire to uncover some of the ways that students experience feelings of connection and disconnection to their schools. One important point that this article would like to make is that students are rarely entirely connected or disconnected from their schools. Rather, as this research has shown, student's affiliation to their schools is a contested space. It is useful to remember that school experiences are not absolute, and that even students who appear disconnected connect at various spaces in various ways. Bruce, Odette' and Penelope were all able to articulate powerful experiences and moments where they felt connected to their school community. They were also able to identify experiences and moments that left them feeling alienated. The evidence seems to suggest that these students identified themselves at this stage of their school career as being more alienated than connected.

The use of a Foucaultian analysis of this focus group is also a considered choice. What Foucault wanted to do was to 'lay bare a modern system of power'.<sup>32</sup> Foucault wanted to do this to open up our understanding to consider the ways that we are made subjects by the institutions that are instrumental in our governing, such as schools. I would argue that these students possess an emerging critical awareness of the power relationships in which they find themselves. It is this emerging critical awareness that causes them to challenge, to resist and to struggle against experiences where they feel that power is being unfairly deployed. They have expectations of the normal and fair way for power to be deployed, where this deployment confirms their place in the institution, they feel connected. When

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Taylor "Foucault on Freedom and Truth" in Davis Couzens Hoy (Ed) *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986 p.69

they think power relationships are unfair, they feel frustrated and alienated from the whole school community.

This is linked to the students' resistance to the hierarchical nature of that normative gaze. For these three students, they resisted an attempt by the school authorities to locate them within a hierarchical continuum of "good" versus "bad" students. These students felt that they were already defined, and through this definition, they felt that they had lost their individuality and their sense of autonomy. This disagreed with their expectations of schools as places where some freedoms, such as their right to be treated equitably, should be protected.

Perhaps the final note is to present the simplest, and maybe the most powerful, conclusions. These students wanted to belong to their school community. They wanted to feel connected to their peers, their school, and most significantly, their teachers. They tended to see connectedness to their school communities as a positive and helpful thing. They possessed an emerging critical awareness that frustrated them rather than rewarded them, and they advocated the potential of school communities working together. We believe that this should become a powerful starting point for schools to work with these and similar students to combat their apparent disconnectedness.

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