

Working within and against the grain of policy in an alternative school

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This paper investigates the ways that teachers in one alternative school blur the boundaries of the political, personal and philosophical in their efforts to re-engage marginalised and disenfranchised young people. The labours of the school staff at Harmony High offer an intriguing narrative of working both within and against the grain of policy mandates, curriculum narrowing and the pervasive effects of neoliberalism. Through the physical and social spatiality, critical pedagogical and affective engagement of learners, new schooling assemblages might be formed. The work being done by teachers in alternative schooling contexts such as that of Harmony High – while situated, meaningful and deeply contextualised – offers hope for reconstituting mainstream education in more socially-just ways that serve the needs and interests of everybody.

Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the experiences of staff working in an alternative schooling context, where the teachers and students “work within and against the grain of policy simultaneously” (Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012, p. 4). This paper sits within a broader context of study in a single school site, where we have considered several elements, including: the philosophical motivations of the school principal (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013); the centrality of music in the curriculum and community (Cleaver & Riddle, 2014); and the importance of considering how marginalised students are (re)engaged in education through alternative schooling experiences (Riddle & Cleaver, 2014). Here we address the challenges of navigating complex political and policy terrains, which is an important feature of the work being done in alternative schools.

We take up the call from Smyth, McInerney and Fish (2013) to deliberately blur the boundaries of the political, personal and philosophical, in order to give space to the “inherent complexities and multi-faceted nature of teaching” (p. 300). Our motivation to perform such work comes from our deeply-held conviction in socially-just schooling, which Connell (1993) argues should be the first priority of educators, particularly those interested in re-engaging young people who have disconnected from their schooling (Mills & McGregor, 2014). Social justice lies at the heart of any attempt to reconstitute mainstream schooling in the interests of those currently least advantaged.

When we contrast alternative to mainstream schooling, we do so with the same pragmatic view that Woods and Woods (2009a) have of understanding mainstream schooling as the conventions of government-funded public education in Western countries such as the USA, UK, and Australia. Alternative education makes use of flexible, innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, as well as a diverse range of philosophical traditions, democratic schooling, and student voice. Kraftl (2013) demonstrates the broad range of alternative schooling contexts, including diverse contexts such as Steiner, Montessori and democratic schools, forest schools, home schooling and care farms. There is a recent surge of interest in alternative approaches to schooling (for example, see: Fielding & Moss, 2011; McGregor, Mills & Thomson, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2010; te Riele, 2007; Thomson, Lingard & Wrigley, 2012; Woods & Woods, 2009). This paper contributes to this burgeoning literature addressing the complexities of alternative schooling philosophies and practices.

Like Francis and Mills (2012), we are concerned about the institutional damage that schooling continues to generate for some young people, particularly those who have

been marginalised, and are keen to seek new ways of pushing back the margins and working at the edges of 'school' (Kraftl, 2013) in order to generate new possibilities for what schooling might be. Perhaps at its most extreme, Harber (2002) raises concerns about schooling as a form of violence against young people, and is particularly critical about the "increasingly technocratic, standardised, regulated, ordered, inspected and test-driven schooling systems aimed primarily at classification and ranking" (p. 14). While we do not necessarily consider schooling to be inherently violent, we take up the notion that such symptoms are a feature of neoliberal governance in schooling that is apparent through many education systems, one that we seek to trouble.

We are interested in the policy movements and political work that alternative schools, such as the one profiled in this paper, undertake to produce a meaningful education (McGregor et. al, 2014). As such, we need to pay close attention to the "organisation of schools, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, with a more democratic, collaborative ethos underpinning all these" (Francis & Mills, 2012, p. 264). This is an important undertaking; given the performative pressures that schooling faces in places such as Australia, the context of our study.

The methodology informing data collection and analysis is one that takes up what Richardson (2000) refers to as a crystallised approach, where the multi-faceted elements of experience might be examined through different narrative lenses. We have published already on the school leadership (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013), how music works as a matrix for engagement (Cleaver & Riddle, 2014), and the daily practices of the school (Riddle & Cleaver, 2015). By taking up a different refractive aspect in each of these papers, an affective narrative encounter is produced, rather than the pinpointing of some stable and obvious truth. We collected data through conversations and observations (filming and field notes) over the period of three years. These data then were used variously to generate vignettes, lyrics, and other narrative forms that then became further data themselves. Part of our work as arts-based narrative researchers was to take up the data in multiple ways in order that we might "constructively and legitimately think and speak from multiple positions within multiple discourses" (Davies 1994, p. 35). The current refraction we take here examines how the philosophical and political movements of the principal and other staff members create a contextualised account of working within and against the grain of policy.

The policy and political context of *Harmony High*

Harmony High is an independent, music industry-focused alternative school that has approximately 80 students in Years 11 and 12, which is the senior phase of secondary schooling in Queensland, Australia. Students come from a range of social backgrounds and previous educational experiences, including both state and private schools. What they share is a sense of disconnection from their prior learning experiences, alongside a passion for contemporary music and a desire for engaging with the music industry. The school is located in an urban area, surrounded by music venues, record labels and media companies.

The school has a strong democratic ethos, a shared commitment of students, parents and teachers, and integrates a music-industry infused curriculum (Cleaver & Riddle, 2014; Riddle & Cleaver, 2013; Riddle & Cleaver, 2014). For this paper, we are interested in profiling how the staff at *Harmony High* navigates the complex policy terrain while adhering to a strong ethos of democratic schooling and social justice. Underpinning this ethos is a commitment to a radical pedagogy of democratic

reciprocity (Fielding & Moss, 2011) and an activist orientation to schooling, which Woods & Woods (2009b) describe as:

trying to alter the conditions that give rise to any adverse consequences suffered by the educational alternative from its positioning on the margins, and/or to change the policies and practices that restrict mainstream education. The aim is a wider social change, in which education is an inherent part (p. 229).

As an independent school, Harmony High is accredited by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, the government body responsible for schools and senior certification. The school is also a member of Independent Schools Queensland. As such, there are a number of compliance and regulatory measures, including independent audits of curriculum and finances that the school must engage with in order to open its doors to students. There are also external examinations, such as the Queensland Core Skills Test, which are sat by senior students. Finally, the school has a governance structure where the principal is responsible to a school board, which has oversight and final approval on policy matters.

Connell (2009) argues that there are some problematic features to policy regimes of accountability and governance, where teachers and teaching become quantified and beholden to logics that are insistent and sometimes incoherent. For example, there is a tension in how the school simultaneously adopts particular aspects of neoliberalism, such as choice and individualism, while also performing a social justice agenda that is based around community, care, and collective responsibility.

It seems that such contradictions are unavoidable as a result of the rise of the global policy field, which brings new forms of performativity and accountability (Lingard & Sellar, 2013). There are important implications for schools and teachers. We are interested here in how the staff at Harmony High are able to balance the competing discourses of alternative schooling as entrepreneurial, market-driven sites of choice, competition and individual autonomy; while providing a meaningful (McGregor et al., 2014) education for young people who have been marginalised and excluded from mainstream schooling.

The marketisation of education provides new instruments of social control (Deleuze, 1992), that offer new conditions in the networked, globalised education policy field (Ball, 2006). There arises a problematic tension between the function of education as producing human capital versus its potential for human possibility (McGregor, 2009). We see this as a central part of how Harmony High walks the policy tightrope, both utilising and rejecting dominant market discourses of education. Ball (2006) describes how the market episteme provides a “non-unified, multiple and complex field of play which realises a dispersion of relationships, subjectivities, values, objects, operations and concepts” (p. 74). We feel that Harmony High demonstrates that there lies potential in this new field of play.

Yet, we also take heed from Apple’s (2004) caution that school is not simply a “passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected to it” (p. 39). The highly regimented and authoritarian control of young people in schooling constitutes particular forms of violence (Harber, 2002) that work against the interest of many people, not only in schools, but across the broader community. Perhaps one of the biggest concerns for progressive educators is in the relations of power that become established (Apple, 2008), allowing particular voices to be heard, while others become silenced.

Giroux (2003) is particularly critical, claiming that within the neoliberal discourse, “there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation, no collective vision, no social agency to challenge the privatization and commercialisation of schooling” (p. 8). Neoliberal subjects, including teachers and students are

simultaneously vulnerable and competitive (Davies, 2005) as the quasi-markets of schooling turn possessive individualism into the highest ideal at the expense of education as a public good (Apple, 2013). The project of schooling itself becomes part of a broader citizenship movement away from collective responsibility to one of individualism (McGregor, 2009). Such a political and policy context is not designed to support “young people with complex material, social and personal needs” (McGregor et al., 2014, p. 2). The importance of finding spaces for students to be given opportunities to engage in education that is connected to their lives, hopes and aspirations, cannot be underrated.

There are consequences for both students and teachers, where children who do not ‘fit’ the system are blamed under a focus on individual accountability (McGregor et al., 2014) and teachers become distrustful (Connell, 2009) as the teaching profession is seen as an anti-competitive monopoly. This is seen clearly in the demonisation of teaching unions and repeated calls for performance-based pay, more rigid accountabilities and compliance measures for teachers. New relations of power are formed and reformed as a constant process of *reform* is undertaken in the movements of policy-makers and school systems attempting to exert some form of control (Deleuze, 1992), albeit a temporary and illusory one.

Along with Youdell (2011), we share a “concern with the political aspects and effects of ordinary, day-to-day practices, pedagogic encounters and everyday life inside schools” (p. 1). This is our project, working closely with the teachers and students at Harmony High over the past few years. As we have previously shown, there is much that alternative schools can offer for mainstream schooling, and here we consider the work undertaken by the staff.

Alternative schooling and re-engaging students

We pick up on the following frames for re-engagement identified by Smyth, McInerney and Fish (2012): rethinking learning spaces and places; attending to affective dimensions of learning; and a critical pedagogy of engagement. These frames, while by no means an exhaustive list, provide a useful means of understanding how students might be engaged in meaningful education that connects with their needs and aspirations (McGregor et al., 2014).

In these next sections of the paper, we share some comments and observations made by the teaching and administration staff during a round of interviews conducted in 2014. These have been chosen by us as illustrative examples of the values and practices, that are ordinary, everyday pedagogies and philosophies that make up the day-to-day experiences at Harmony High. These comments serve to highlight the various domains of educational purpose described by Biesta (2015) as being: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Our argument in this paper is that the (re)engagement of learners in education allows them to not only succeed in the academic domain of schooling, but also enables a capacity for broader democratic engagement.

Rethinking learning spaces and places

Traditional mass schooling has struggled to accommodate the competing pressures of social justice and increasingly neoliberal education policies. Schools remain remarkably consistent with the industrial-era design of desks in rows inside rooms that resemble factories more than welcoming spaces of inquiry. We are cautious not to claim that

public schooling is broken or that it might somehow be fixed through the market-measures of vouchers, charter schools (USA), free schools (UK) or independent public schools (Australia). Rather, it is our hope to take some of the lessons from alternative schooling as productive elements of hope for reconstituting mainstream schooling in the interests those who are currently least advantaged by the system.

We have that mix of some students who would I think probably have done very well at a traditional school and are really interested to come to Harmony High because they have extra interest in the music industry and they are strong performers and want to develop that, and then we have other students who don't feel like they fit in so well at other schools (Tom)

The importance of rethinking learning spaces and places is demonstrated in recent work around geographical, physical and social learning contexts (Kraftl, 2003; Mills & McGregor, 2013; Smyth & McInerney, 2013). In order to understand how learning spaces like Harmony High work, we borrow from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the notion of *assemblage*. Assemblages have multiple elements including “human, social, and technical machines” (p. 36). Youdell (2011) theorises the assemblage in schools as involving the interaction of humans with non-human elements. Spatiality, both social and physical, are also inextricably linked through geographies of learning (Kraft, 2013), and form part of the complex assemblage of schooling. The physical and social organisation of schools form an important spatial component (Kraftl, 2013) of the schooling assemblage.

For example, Harmony High’s assemblage includes music, humans, and also “economy and politics, policy, organizational arrangements, knowledge, subjectivity, pedagogy, everyday practices and feelings come together to form the education assemblage” (Youdell, 2011, p. 14). This is an important aspect of understanding how the relations between people, politics, philosophies and pedagogies are intra-active within schools. These offer particular forces and flows of human and non-human relations, and through understanding how these might be mainstreamed or marginalised is an important part of the politics of schooling (Riddle, Black & Trimmer, 2015).

One of the things I love about it is the freedom that we have as staff but also the freedom that students have as well. And that's something that is really important to me, that I'm allowed to not only just do my job but to develop programs and activities that are important to me, I'm given that license to do that. (Angus)

I can spend more time helping the student, helping young people. And that's I feel what most people get into teaching to do, and then they get caught up in a lot of bureaucratic stuff which may be there because of the large numbers of students there are in government schools, or it might just be because we haven't restructured it since the 'fifties or whatever. (The Gentleman)

There is a clear ethos of care through a radical revisioning of the relationships between teachers and students (Fielding & Moss, 2013) at Harmony High, one that works against the “competitive accountability regimes currently dominant within mainstream schools” (McGregor et. al, 2014, p. 13). Like McGregor and Mills (2014), we are interested in schooling sites that premise alternative education on social justice; rejecting deficit constructions of young people as needing ‘fixing’. Instead, it is

schooling that should be fixed (Harber, 2002). The work of alternative schools such as Harmony High help to illuminate how the pushing, pulling and entangling of personal and public politics can reframe schooling in more socially-just ways.

In taking account of the wide dimensions of people's lives, we note how Harmony High positively focuses on fostering student and teacher freedom to 'be themselves'. This contrasts with the secretive component within the hidden curriculum which often "displaces the professed educational ideals and goals of the classroom, teacher or school" (McLaren, 2007, p.212) and where in many mainstream contexts "what is important is the experience of submitting to the discipline of a subject and becoming the kind of person it is supposed to make you" (Young, 2008, p. 20 and see discussion Cleaver & Ballantyne, 2014).

I love watching this at the start of every intake of a new group 'cause they're wondering what we're about and we're wondering where they've come from and all that- but it's like they look relieved, there's this look of relief on their face that they can actually be themselves in the school. And I think that's... it's a feeling shared even amongst the staff, is the feeling that we can too be ourselves. (Serena)

I remember when the chair of the school board first met me I was running a youth centre down in Browns Plains and we had a recording studio there, and we had this old knackered couch that was falling apart. He walks through the new school building the other night for the first time and he goes, "Where's your old knackered couch?" He said, "You can't lose sight of that, that's part of who you are, that's part of who the institution is." (Neil)

The relational spaces opened up through the interactions of teachers and students at Harmony High establishes particular conditions of learning (Smyth & McInerney, 2013) that would not be possible within deficit discourses and 'at-risk' narratives. Schussler (2009) argues that teachers should allow students multiple and flexible opportunities for learning success and to have respect for students as learners. This leads to the importance of attending to dimensions of teaching that go beyond simple curriculum considerations.

Attending to affective dimensions of learning

Music, and a shared interest in the contemporary music industry, is a significant cohesive element at the school. Teachers are hired partly on the basis of having themselves participated in the music industry as musicians, managers, agents and publicists. A music focused student-driven curriculum combined with an ethos of care and high expectations (Schussler, 2009) is evident in the school's approach to curriculum and pedagogy. Through the relational power of music (Cleaver & Riddle, 2014), the staff work together to make Harmony High a site of social improvement for the least advantaged.

I think the biggest attraction for here is that obviously there's the love of music has to be the passion for the kid, but because it's small and it is a family some of the kid'll say 'Yeah well I'm not gonna love everybody but I'm gonna care about everybody because it's like my family, and don't you pick on that person because

I'll be up you if you do' sort of thing, even though they may not hang out day to day. And I think a lot of kids come to us from schools where there's either a lot of pressure on them to do things a certain way or get bullied quite a lot because they're different, you know. We attract a lot of kids who might be Asperger's or ADHD or stuff like that because they can be themselves here, and even though they can be pulled up on bad behaviour they're not seen as different or picked on because they are the same as everybody else. (Mama Camp)

An important distinction at Harmony High is that the students are invested with relational power and relational trust (Smyth, 2012). This trust is evident in the processes and daily experiences of students, 'family meetings', and in the shifting focus from disciplinary rules and regulations to one of democratic, participatory citizenship (Apple, 2013). Trust is central to the sense of community and belonging at Harmony High and plays a key role in critical and radical approaches to teaching and learning (Giroux, 2004).

We treat them differently. They get trust from the word go from us, we unlock everything in the building. I would have no hesitation throwing most of the kids at our school the keys to the building and the security code. (Neil)

We have less rules, which means in a way we have less ways of getting them in trouble, you know. I think sometimes schools, and partly because they're so enormous, they have really strict rules because they have to try and keep them in line. Whereas we don't need to worry about that quite as much; we can relate to students on a personal level rather than treating them as drones or as things. We can actually talk to them as though they're peers who maybe just need a bit more help. (The Gentleman)

I think once the kids knew here that we actually trusted them they stopped playing a lot of games that they'd been playing at their previous schools, and they could drop a lot of the exterior and their walls and the images all kind of went (Serena)

We just take the rules away and we go 'There are four pillars: Trust, Respect, Community and Participation', that's it. And all of our policies, if we can't link them back to those four we ask ourselves 'Why have we got that policy in?' And if we can't find a reason we throw that policy out. Those four pillars cover everything. And when you think about life, Trust, Respect, Community and Participation; there's not a lot else. (Neil)

The usual problems faced in schools are able to become opportunities through continual reference to the four pillars of trust, respect, community and participation. As Smyth (2012) explains, "schools are places that require substantial risk-taking, innovation and experimentation by teachers and students if learning is to occur, and this means high levels of trust, care and respect" (p. 15). By removing strict rules and routines that restrict student movement and expression, much of the motivation to bend or break rules is no longer applicable.

A real strength of the school is our flexibility (Angus)

*At this school I feel like I can actually make a difference, I can see students improving. Partly the advantage is that because I'm teaching part-time I only have two classes, and it's actually the same students in each class. So I can spend a bit more time on those particular students, whereas at previous schools if I taught five classes that's, you know, I won't do the maths right now but...
(The Gentleman)*

The strong sense of self (Francis & Mills, 2012) held by teachers at Harmony High is a vital part of the project of blurring boundaries between the political, personal and philosophical aspects of teachers' work (Connell, 2009). The membership of staff and students to the school 'family', the flexible arrangements of curricular and other organisational features foster the sense of belonging that is critical to successful re-engagement of marginalised and disenfranchised learners.

Critical pedagogy of engagement

There is a strong desire to work within and against the grain of policy at Harmony High. While adhering to the requirements of curriculum authorities and external accreditation, teachers find a way to also personalise and cater to the particular interests of students. In this case, students at Harmony High share a strong connection to music, which acts as a glue (Cleaver & Riddle, 2014) across curriculum, community and culture. This is part of the critical pedagogy of engagement that is so important in re-engaging with students in education.

As much as we can, we use the music industry as a way of teaching curriculum. So, you know, teaching what the government wants to be in the curriculum as well as what we think should be in there (The Gentleman)

At Harmony High, the students are recognised as being capable, intelligent and creative people who bring a wealth of knowledge, resources and capacities to the school. As McGregor and Mills (2012) describe, through the developing of positive emotional connections between staff and students, opportunities to engage with diversity is made possible. Through a critical pedagogy of engagement it is possible for students and teachers to "construct educational identities for themselves within/against the wider global educational policy flows" (Smyth & Robinson, 2015, p. 220). As such, relationships are a key component of the focus on engaging learners at Harmony High.

The relationships with students and with staff I think is probably one of the biggest differentiators (Tom)

An important feature of the personal philosophies of staff on the school can be seen in the capacity to act as a site of radical counter-politics (Youdell, 2011). This goes well beyond the notion of work as being purely for financial gain. It speaks, indeed to the very question of the purpose of education. For example, McGregor and Mills (2012) found the importance that providing opportunities for (re)engaging young people in education has on developing positive life chances. This is clearly evident in Mama Camp's comments below, where she describes the literal 'life saving' effect of Harmony High for one student.

Sometimes people go 'Oh not-for-profit- what do you guys get out of it?' and I say, 'Well it's not just a monetary thing; it's a priceless thing when you see a kid who has been looked after by the Department of Communities comes through the school and at the end of it said they'd be dead without us'. So I say, 'You can't put a price on that.' So it's one of those things, you know, I think you've got to have a heart for it. (Mama Camp)

The personal politics of staff, who are committed to lived democracy and re-engagement of marginalised learners simply cannot be understated. While the current neoliberal education policy context rewards individual choice and market-based reform measures, there is power in collective action that is captured through a critical pedagogy of engagement (Giroux, 2003; 2004).

We consider Harmony High to be a fairly atypical site of radical counter-politics of schooling, which works alongside notions of participatory democracy, which is intimately connected to justice and equity (Fielding & Moss, 2011). At the same time, we acknowledge that democracy itself is a contested and problematic notion, one that Apple (2008) describes as being redefined as *choice* in market-systems, rather than the collective project of building public institutions, such as education. This is troubling, given the uneasy relationship between discourses of choice and social justice that are important to places like Harmony High. Apple (2013) explains that “democratic schooling is not just about schools. It is about what kind of society we want and what kinds of politics will help us get there” (p. 49).

I think some people don't realise the amount of work that went into, for example, developing the work programs prior to the school even starting (Angus)

As a school we've got to kind of find ways to beg, borrow and steal and reconstitute the curriculum to fit our purpose (Wolfgang)

Music is that common thread through all of our subjects and we engage them through talking about music: what music they're into, how we can tie their subject areas into the music industry... So music ties the whole school together, and once you've sparked that interest you've really got them (Serena)

Perhaps one of the strengths afforded through the tensions of choice, autonomy and social justice in alternative schooling can be seen in the capacity to change curriculum and pedagogy to suit students. There is a certain freedom in being able to “try out new educational methods and simultaneously conduct credible research which can be shared within the educational community” (Cable, Plucker & Spradlin, 2009, p. 1). Through projects such as the one that we have been engaging in at Harmony High, there is a capacity to speak back to the mainstream from the margins (Riddle & Cleaver, 2015), in order to consider how curricular justice might better serve the interests of students who are currently least advantaged in our schools.

Given Connell’s (2009) claim that the construction of the *academically-engaged pupil* is a centre-piece of education systems that seek to standardise curriculum and assessment practices, there is a need to provide a counter-narrative for teachers and students to work in ways that serve the particular social, cultural, intellectual and economic interests of their own contexts. As McGregor et. al (2014) explain, we require “a ‘curricular justice’ that ensures that students regard their learning as meaningful is

also critical to the provision of a socially just education” (p. 15). It is our claim that seeking a curricular justice will help to do this.

Concluding thoughts

The project of re-engaging young people in schooling requires careful rethinking of schools, curriculum and the use of critical pedagogies that connect to the material and social dimensions of lives. We agree with Mills and McGregor (2014), that “it is time for a ‘re-imagining’ of what schools could be” (p. 134). In the process, we need to take Deleuze’s (1992) advice that “there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (p. 4). This is why the policy movements of the staff and students of Harmony High are so important, because they provide a place where a counter-politics of resistance can be lived. As Youdell (2011) explains, everyday struggles and resistances can help to recreate new “pedagogic forms and relationships and who is privileged or disregarded by these; or they might seek to trouble ‘who’ educators and students are and can be” (p. 16). Fielding and Moss (2011) make the political call to action to “overthrow the dictatorship of no alternatives” (p. 1), and in some small part, that is our intent here.

There is little doubt that engaging in political action through schooling is risky (Apple, 2008), yet vitally important to engage with those ethical commitments to provide a meaningful education for all young people. As Giroux (2003) explains, “any theory of politics and resistance must be concerned with the conditions, the agents, and the current levels of struggle that lead to social transformation” (p. 8). While there is no sudden revolutionary rupture (Fielding & Moss, 2011), transformational school sites such as Harmony High provide ethical and democratic educational practices that are contextually-relevant and offer the chance to think and live schooling differently.

Resistance is multiple and takes a range of forms within and across schooling contexts, forming new assemblages of schooling. The notion of transforming the social and material conditions of lives through a meaningful education is central to the argument for rethinking schools as sites of radical counter-politics and reciprocal relationships. Of course, this is not to suggest that alternative schools can provide a panacea for the complex concerns of contemporary schooling. We would not wish to see public schooling to abrogate its responsibility to marginalised and disenfranchised students (Mills & McGregor, 2013). Nor would we argue that a simple solution for reconstructing mainstream schooling in the interests of the most disadvantaged exists. However, we contend there are possibilities for blurring the boundaries between mainstream schooling and alternative schooling models, such as that provided at Harmony High. Through the physical and social spatiality, critical pedagogical and affective engagement of learners, it might be possible to form new schooling assemblages that provide different opportunities for learning success that are not possible in a more narrowly-conceived notion of schooling.

It is important to commit to an enduring sense of social justice and community, which are the foundations of an ethical and connected schooling. Our argument here is not that alternative schools should replace mainstream schools, but rather that mainstream schooling might be reimagined in the interests of those who are least advantaged by the current systems. By sharing this detailed account of Harmony High as a site where the school is able to work both within and against the grain of policy shows that it is possible for an ethic of care, reciprocity, trust and respect to underpin an

ethos of schooling in order to provide all students with opportunities for a meaningful education.

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