



Book Review: Smyth, J. & Hattam, R., with Cannon, J., Edwards, J., Wilson, N., & Wurst, S. (2004). *'Dropping out', drifting off, being excluded: Becoming somebody without school*. New York: Peter Lang.

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This book is a quite simply a 'must read' for all secondary school teachers, every student on a secondary pre-service teacher education course and all Board of Trustee members in this country. The findings and recommendations are directly relevant to contemporary secondary schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand and it would be foolish in the extreme for policy makers, school leaders or classroom teachers to dismiss the research on any parochial argument that schools are different 'across the ditch'. Through their reporting and analysis of interviews undertaken with two hundred young people who left school early or were 'at risk' of doing so in South Australia, Smyth, Hattam and colleagues achieve four fundamentally important things in the context of our knowledge of how contemporary secondary schooling works.

First, they affirm the value of continuing efforts by a minority of critically minded secondary teachers to make an enduringly abstract senior secondary school curriculum concrete and meaningful. This meaning-making by teachers is an essential duty to the vast majority of young people who struggle day after day, year after year to figure out the relevance of traditional, conservative schooling practices to the aspirations they have for the sort of independent person they hope to become; and for the adult world in which they will have to make their living. Equally, the accounts and portraits of the two hundred young people interviewed for the study sharply demonstrate that while early leaving occurs for many complex and interrelated reasons, a basic lack of respect, empathy and classroom creativity from significant numbers of teachers almost guarantees antagonism, antipathy or indifference in response from students.

Second, in their commitment to listen to and give voice to students throughout the book, they illustrate in poignant detail through the words of those who leave school early just how damaging secondary school cultures (teaching, learning, management and peer group) often are to young people's life and career choices. In other words, they do not seek to 'blame' either early school leavers or teachers for school drop out, as many policy analysts and populist politicians do. Rather, they examine the ways in which societal and institutional practices intersect with individual lives to produce and sustain current rates of alienation, non-completion and the inevitable exclusion these bring from formal educational success.

Third, they analyse these very intimate and stark accounts from young people in order to reveal the complex and fragmentary ways in which they,

young people, interact with popular culture, labour market processes, credentialling, peers and families as they progress through the upper reaches of post-compulsory secondary schooling. It is made evident at the outset of the study that, statistically, secondary schooling ill-serves the majority of South Australian students who experience it. Of those students who entered Year 8 in 1992, just under three quarters enrolled in Year 12. Less than half of the 1992 cohort gained their terminal Certificate of Education and just over one in four enrolled at University. In their data presentation and analysis, and the theorising that takes place around these, the authors seek detailed explanations of what these figures mean for real people, the individuals who make up the statistical patterns of non-completion by the majority.

Fourth and most importantly, perhaps, they suggest concrete and eminently pragmatic ways in which teachers in secondary schools might actively overcome the complex patterns of institutional 'aggression' and 'passivity' that prevent teachers and students from engaging in authentic academic and social growth while they are at school. In this sense it is ultimately a book of considerable optimism and hope that rises above the very evident frustration, alienation and resigned acceptance of so many of the early school leaver students interviewed for the study.

The book is part of a larger study of early school leaving practices among South Australian youth in the period 1997-1999. The analysis presented in this book is qualitative, intended to give an authentic voice to the experiences and words of students who historically have been ignored in education policy and research considerations. The quality of the data that permeate the book is an appropriate testament to the high levels of trust that the researchers were able to establish with the students they interviewed. The richness of the portraits drawn from the interview data, particularly from students who clearly found it difficult to articulate and reflect on their experiences of schooling, is a tribute to the care and empathy of the researchers over the years of the study. The depth and complexity of analysis in each chapter serves as ample illustration of the intellectual rigour and moral commitment of the researchers to document the realities of early school leaving in its manifold, contradictory, fragmented strands.

That the researchers manage to derive from their complex analysis of young people's stories of non-completion, clear signposts (pp. 93-94) for schooling policy and practice is evidence of a commitment to the conduct of emancipatory educational research, research that cuts through policy rhetoric in order to unearth areas of daily practice that must be addressed if meaningful and lasting educational change for the benefit of the research informants, and those like them in educational systems elsewhere, is to be achieved. In this regard, the researchers appear to have fully repaid the significant debt they owe to the early school leavers who confided and trusted their stories to them.