

## LEARNING BY EXAMPLE: SCHOOL EXCLUSION AND LIFE-ENACTED LEARNING

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**Abstract:** From the discourse of life-long learning comes the proposal that any interaction has the potential to become a learning experience. Further, that the relationships established and enacted via such exchanges are paramount to learning and psychosocial development. With this in mind the question begs: what is it that governments expect students and their school communities to learn from instances of State sanctioned exclusion? In this paper the discursive context is set with an analysis of Queensland's *Education (General Provisions) Act 1989* and discussion of the legislative power authorised to principals to enforce school exclusion. From this examination it will be tendered that legislative practice is incongruent with several policy initiatives currently directing State and federal educational practice in Australia. The cost of this conflict is examined in the second part of the paper when interview narratives, sourced from students who have experienced formal school exclusion, will be presented. It is argued that language use does contribute to the ongoing and situated construction of student's identities and thus has the potential to engage or estrange a variety of learning-based relationships. In this sense the principle of temporality inferred in the concept of life-long learning can be conjoined with the contextual importance of life-enacted learning encouraged through relational engagement. To enable such a transformation it is necessary to re-vision the principles informing the conduct of every day relationships. The concept of relational responsibility is advanced as a promising supplement to individually-based discourses which dominate and debilitate contemporary communicative activity. Activity, in and through which, the practice of education takes place.

## Introduction

Just over two years ago the Federal government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), through the Curriculum Corporation, published their study regarding Values Education in Australia (Curriculum Corporation, 2003). One of the central aims of the work was to make recommendations on a set of Principles and a Framework for improving values education in schools across the country. From a review of the literature and an engagement with case study schools the qualitative investigation produced a set of ten values said to have emerged from the research. One of these was responsibility. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin *respondere* meaning ‘to respond’ and the importance of the word’s origin will become apparent momentarily. A more immediate issue however is the question of whether we can in fact teach responsibility to our students. And if so how this should be done? It should be noted that these questions are presupposed by an assumption that we are (or at least potentially could be) in agreement as to what responsibility is and how this may be communicated to the person known as the student/learner. Also, that this kind of focus retains an individualistic and unidirectional outlook and is reminiscent of Freire’s (1970) criticisms of a deposit-banking model of education. To approach the question another way we could ask about the relational responsibilities of participants in communicative activity. Such redirection does two things: first, it engages both participants, teacher and student, in a reciprocal communicative process and second, the concept refrains from positioning either participant as the one who should be doing the learning. In looking at the action as an inclusive and responsive exchange knowledge is understood as a co-production developed through the participants’ responsibilities to each other in the process of education. And therein lies the basis of my argument. If we are able to engage others around the concept of responsibility via curriculum, our pedagogies will be ultimately held to account as well. From these accounts we must acknowledge that we too are life-long learners and in reciprocal processes of communicative activity educators promote life-enacted learning. Thus, as fully responsible participants educators are formally engaged to not only teach but to enact or show what is meant by the lesson. As Wittgenstein (1969, no. 204) suggested, “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (emphasis in original).

The issue of responsible action is called front and centre when accounting for practices of school suspension and exclusion. Often this account focuses on the student and what s/he has done to warrant State-sanctioned removal from their school. In this paper I will go on to engage excerpts from interviews sourced from students who have experienced formal school exclusion but first I would like to consider the legislation that permits such action. As critical discourse analysts we are moved to engage socio-political practice at varying levels of interest. So not only will the reported experiences of students excluded from school be of importance here but I am also keen to consider how school principals are directed via the legislation to carry out such practice. Elsewhere (Corcoran, 2003) I have called this process the principal’s gamble for in Queensland it is the principal of the educational institution who is authorised to decide when the student should no longer be a part of the school community. The decision to exclude or retain a student is a gamble because it affects future relationships which, always being co-produced, can never be guaranteed their outcomes. Thus the issue of behaviour, school staff’s especially, directly contributes to the hidden curriculum. What we know to be responsibility is more

than a set of rules, it is just as much about how we practice understanding, respect and trust (three more values highlighted in the Australian study) through pedagogy and disciplinary practice in school communities. Yet what we can be confident of is the way in which we enact our responsibilities to relationships and in the conclusion of this paper I explore further the concept of relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). This concept offers those involved in communicative activity, none more important than education, alternate options to a practice currently dominated by a pervasive discourse of individualism.

## **The Principal's gamble**

Legislation guiding schooling in Queensland was formally introduced in 1860 with the introduction of the *Education Act*. The Act primarily conveyed authority through the Board of General Education to establish and administer primary schools in the State. In 1875 the *State Education Act* superseded its predecessor and amongst its administrative tasks the Act decreed compulsory education for children aged between 6 and 12 years, directed that State education be secular, that education was to be free and the Department of Public Instruction be established to administer the Act. It was some time before the passage of the next *State Education Act* in 1964. This version of the legislation now formally included secondary schools under the authority and administration of the Act and raised the compulsory attendance age to 15. Another 25 years passed before the current legislation, the *Education (General Provisions) Act* was introduced in 1989 (hereafter EA). It is from the current legislation that the following discourse analysis is sourced. Of particular interest here is the section of the Act imbuing authority to school administrators regarding student suspension and exclusion – Part IV: The Good Order and Management of State Educational Institutions.

Reference to student age has remained a consistent feature in Queensland legislation. Dominant discourses of human development, universally applied in Western societies and very much tied to chronological constructions, tell us that with age comes maturity and responsibility and consequently certain practices have to be put into place to assist children to learn values. But to mitigate opportunities for choice on the basis of age, i.e. that a student's potential for acting responsibly is directly correlated to their age, surely disempowers the relationship and limits potential learning for those involved. An example and comparable form of developmentalist discourse appears in Part 4 of the Act. In discussing the elements of a school's behaviour management plan, it is suggested that a principal should "encourage all students attending the institution to take increasing responsibility for their own behaviour and the consequences of their actions" (EA, p. 24). Perhaps what this means is that, over time of enrolment and with no relevance to age, the student should be encouraged to take increased responsibility. I doubt it. The chance that a principal would allow a Year 12 student (approximately 17 years old in Queensland and for argument's sake let's say they are new to the school) several months to develop a sense of responsibility seems highly improbable. What I am suggesting is that the increase in responsibility referred to in the legislation implicitly follows a developmental/ageist discourse. That is, it is with age as the determining factor that an individual develops responsibility and conversely, the younger the individual the less they are able to assume responsibility for their actions. The ramifications of this discourse concern me greatly but perhaps I should recontextualise my argument. My concern here is with students who are subjected to school exclusion and how they are represented and dealt with in this piece of legislation. What I find difficult to understand

is how a student is presumed to lack responsibility because of their age and presumed stage of development but (as is played out in schools each day) then still able to bear the responsibility of their actions if and when the time comes for behavioural discipline to be dispensed. It would seem that within this example dealing retributive discourses trump any discourse of development regardless of how this is constructed.

I will offer another instance which succinctly encapsulates the direction of the text. According to the Act there are two definite categories of student according to age. There are students who fall under the category of compulsory attendees (CAs) and the binary, non-compulsory attendees (NCAs). These groups are differentiated on the basis of age: CAs fall between 6 years and 15 years of age and NCAs are students over the age of 15 years. The splitting of the two groups becomes particularly interesting when it comes to describing the act of exclusion in the text. For CAs, the text lays out “grounds for exclusion” (EA, p. 26) but in relation to NCAs, it reads as “grounds for cancelling enrolment of student more than the age of compulsory attendance” (EA, p. 30). The question should be asked: how it is that there is need to differentiate between the two groups in relation to the description of the action? An answer might be found in section 39(b) of the Act. In discussing the grounds for cancellation of enrolment involving NCAs, one such example may be when “the student’s behaviour amounts to refusal to participate in the program of instruction provided at the institution” (EA, p. 30). The suggestion here is that the student’s refusal to participate is a telltale sign of their motivational state. Couple this product of inference with the developmental discourse discussed a moment ago and the student has themselves taken responsibility, through their actions, for the cancellation of their enrolment – something that students of compulsory attendance age can not seemingly do. For those students, exclusion is a byproduct of irresponsible and presumably unintentional behaviour. What possible consequences could there be in removing choice in the form of an ability to act responsibly from student-teacher/principal relationships? Why not ask the students?

## Voices from a distance

The first interview excerpt comes from Adam. He was 13 years old at the time of this interview and had been excluded from his previous school for truancy and disrespectful behaviours such as swearing at staff. This excerpt is of interest here for two reasons. First, a question presents regarding Adam’s understanding of the relationship taking place and second, that this knowledge then has a determining influence on subsequent choices and behaviours.

TC: Right. So that (.4) okay just ah going back to that um being excluded from (.6) from Kinwar did they um (.5) did you think it was fair that they did that?

Adam: Yes.

TC: How come?

Adam: Because um they didn’t know what else to- I’d been in um Access program (1.7) which is that=

TC: =yep y[ep.] [Behaviour Management Support]

Adam: [Sec]ondary [Behaviour Management Support] Program. Yes.

TC: Yep.

Adam: You know about the people there?

TC: Yeah I [do.] Yep.

Adam: [Mary] Yeah (.8) with them yeah.  
TC: Yep. So: (1.6) you'd what say that it was fair that they (x) they excluded you because.  
Adam: They had nothing else to do with you.  
TC: Right.  
Adam: They helped me too much and I didn't take it so.  
TC: Right. (3.1) So- (1.7) what could you say that you've learnt from exclusion? Is there anything you have learnt from it?  
Adam: Not to get excluded again.  
TC: Right. Well you were just saying about the help (2.3) would you say that um=  
Adam: =I'll take help next time.  
TC: Oh really? Wha- what do you think stopped you from taking it last time?  
Adam: It's just (.4) wanting my friends really. I wanted to stay with my friends.

When responsible action, however described, is situated contextually it acquires personal, relational and systemic significance. For example, when questioned whether he considered his exclusion to be fair Adam suggests it was. His answer intimates that he has some form of understanding regarding the appropriateness or otherwise of his behaviour and its impact on the school. But there is an interesting discursive conveyance taking place as an 'us and them' relational frame is developed in the course of his reported experience. Adam proposes that it was fair for the school to exclude because *they* had reached a point, as far as he could see, where the school's options to respond to him had been exhausted. It does not seem from Adam's response that what was taking place at the school had the potential to be considered outside of this binary separation. Not only does his response sound familiar with regards prevalent individualistic discourse, wherein practices of blame are at their most damaging when divisive, it also suggests a process of disempowerment in relation to Adam's ability to develop a suitable response to the prevailing concerns. His use of the adverb 'too' is telling in this instance. For Adam to say that the school and its staff had 'helped me too much' infers that Adam experienced a degree of imbalance in the relationship. Recall, Adam was 13 years old at the time of his exclusion and according to the legislation a compulsory attendee. From his account it would seem that collaborative options had not been relationally developed nor realised prior to his exclusion from school. Where were the opportunities for Adam's voice to be heard?

To answer this question more needs to be said regarding my contention that Adam was acting responsibly in the action as reported. When asked what may have stopped him from taking the school staff's assistance Adam says that he wanted to remain with his friends. A separatist discourse presents once again for in choosing to stay connected to his peers he seemingly can not remain connected to the institution. But his choice, if marked as irresponsible, would privilege the adult's version of responsibility in the situation. As an act of resistance or an act of empowerment Adam's choice may in fact be the only responsible one he felt he could make at the time. Also, there is little doubt that having to make this choice will ultimately impact on how Adam sees himself and on the social construction of his identity. A similar point is made by Michael Ungar (2004) in his view of how troubled adolescents draw upon personal resilience. He says

We seek in our children, both boys and girls, a fanatical desire for them to be conventional without attention to their (and our own) discourses of resistance. Efficacy in social relations that give voice to this resistance is closely linked to experiences of competence, whether that competence is expressed prosocially or problematically (p. 139-40).

In offering an alternate understanding of the discursive action taking place it is necessary and frankly respectful to consider Adam's pronouncement as a significant personal movement in his relationship with the school administration.

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Gary, our second example, is an NCA (non-compulsory attendee). In this segment he talks about the action he took in relation to smoking at his new school. To preface this excerpt it should be noted that it is illegal for staff or students to smoke at an Education Queensland facility. As a 17 year old student Gary had been excluded from his previous school for possession of alcohol and tobacco on school property and a history of relational difficulties with school staff.

TC: So wha- then they're more accepting? More flexible [here?]

Gary: [Yeah.]

TC: Right.

Gary: And that's what's accepting people in what you do around the class also.

TC: In what you do around the class?

Gary: Yeah. Well (.4) I'll have a cigarette at the back gate and most teachers come out.

TC: Right.

Gary: And tell us to move along and that. If you don't move on they say 'I'll sit down' and have a chat with youse and then when their- (.3) that duty's finished they just walk away and let us keep sitting there and that's it. Yeah.

TC: You smoke in front of them?

Gary: Nup.

TC: Nup?

Gary: Don't want to do that.

TC: Right. (1.1)

Gary: 'Cause they do I'll try not to do anything. I realise they will. They will suspend me. Oh well (.5) expel me here because I have no warnings. I've come in on no warnings so if I get (.3) if I swear at a teacher or (.5) miss a day of school without an explanation or (.4) that's it. I'm out.

TC: So (.4) bu- when you were enrolled they told you that you were enrolling with no warnings?

Gary: Uhuh. (2.3) Yeah [well-]

TC: [What] did you think about that?

Gary: I went to school for that long not to be (.3) I don't know (.3) confused or try not to not bother.

TC: You cou- (.3) that was acceptable to you?

Gary: Yeah. I figured well it was. At least they're trying (.6) to be a certain person on my side.

The discourse to highlight from this section of the interview is that of zero tolerance and how this plays out in Gary's relational understanding. It is not surprising that this discourse is evidenced in Gary's response given the way NCAs figure in the section of the Act previously discussed. From Gary's narrative he tells us that he is purposively making the choice of where and when to smoke whilst he is at school. The issue for discussion is not whether Gary smokes on school property as he suggests that he is at least on the boundary of the school when he chooses to light up. Neither is it his age for Gary had reported earlier in the interview that he lives independently and as such can decide for himself whether or not he should smoke. The concern I believe is whether Gary's actions would be acknowledged as responsible under a zero tolerance policy. Even if the school, acting with best intentions, used the zero tolerance discourse to instill the fear of potential exclusion with Gary, such action would be highly controversial and necessitate immediate attention regarding its appropriateness as a means for relational engagement. But an ironic and even more alarming discursive turn is yet to be taken. It comes from Gary's contention that in their use of the zero tolerance policy the school and its staff are evidentially showing that they care. To support this point he says that he sees them as 'trying' and he considers the staff to be 'on my side'. As a society we must be able to show or enact responsible action in some other way than to brutishly intimidate another, and then if that fails, exclude them from the social order. If this is what teaching values in education is about we desperately need to revise the lesson plan.

## **Conclusions**

Continued development, in our opinion, demands a rejection of knowing as the sole or dominant form of understanding. Activity must replace reality, even as performing replaces knowing in the practice and understanding of human life (Newman & Holzman, 1997, p. 61).

I have argued that education is an activity in which knowledge is performed. In adopting a relational frame we can engage an understanding of knowledge as enacted discursively through the use of particular language games and as it is embodied via the interpersonal practice of teaching. Both ways of conceptualising educative endeavour promote relational responsibility wherein two or more parties engage and in dialogic reciprocity transformative action takes place. McNamee and Gergen (1999) suggest that transformation of this kind occurs firstly, through changing the parties understanding of the act in question and secondly, through altering the relations for those involved. Application of these ideas are consistent with the values agenda currently in favour in Australian schools. Teaching responsibility, the example I have concentrated on, requires an explicit reworking of the practice engaging the lesson. This needs to be supported and promoted from within a range of situated actions, school legislation and the practice of exclusion being but one. We can change the way we understand a practice through changing the way we position and construct the relationships involved but this, as straightforward as it sounds, requires a vital corresponding shift. Individualised discourses essentially support hierarchical relationships wherein collaborative engagement is dominated by authoritarian practice. Such discourse also promotes blame, the absence of tolerance and does not invite individuals, as valued participants, to perform responsibility in learning based relationships. The practice of education is a communicative activity carried out in the responsive engagement of participants showing value to one another. Surely that is what is meant by learning by example.

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## Appendix 1 Transcription symbols

SYMBOL	EXAMPLE	EXPLANATION
[    ]	Quite a [ while] [ yeah ]	Brackets mark the onset and completion of overlapping talk
=	what I said= =But you didn't	Where one turn runs into another with no interval
(.4)	yes (.2) yeah	Elapsed time between speaker turns or duration of pause within a speaker's turn
:::	O:kay?	Mark the prolongation of the sound immediately before; more colons show a longer prolongation
.hhh	I feel that (.3) .hhh	A row of h's prefixed by a dot indicates an inbreath; without a dot an outbreath. The length of the row of h's indicates the length of the breath
(    )	future risks and (    ) and life	Something was heard but unable to hear what it was

(word)	you could be (there) and here	Possible hearing
(( ))	confirm that ((stands up))	Clarifactory comment or description which is not a transcribed utterance
. ? ,	What do you think?	A period represents falling intonation, a question mark represents rising intonation, and a comma represents a falling-rising intonation
-	becau-	Represents a cutting off short of the immediately prior syllable
^	dr^ink	Indicates a marked pitch rise
(x)	I (x) I did	Indicates a stutter on the part of the speaker
°	°yeh°	Talk that is quieter than the surrounding talk