

**THE (UN) CRITICAL SCHOOL TEACHER:  
THREE LESSONS ABOUT TEACHER ENGAGEMENT WORK  
WITH MARGINALISED STUDENTS IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES**

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## **Thesis Declaration**

I certify that the educational doctorate entitled: 'The (Un) Critical Schoolteacher: Three lessons about teacher engagement work with marginalised young people in neoliberal times', submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education, is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this doctorate in whole or in part has not been submitted for an award, including a higher degree, to any other university or institution.

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## **ANDREW MAYNARD BILLS**

### **Date**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Secondary schooling continues to marginalise a significant minority of young people attending school in South Australia. As a consequence, I was a teacher morally obliged to redress the institutional codes, social relations and pedagogical practices of three secondary schools for those young people who were marginalised by them. Unfortunately, my lack of critical sociological awareness at the time associated with the insidious influence of what Foucault described as 'neoliberal governmentalities' drove my emancipatory school re-engagement efforts towards a neoliberal schooling curriculum that valued the development of entrepreneurial values and schooling for the labour market. The losers in all of this were many of the students I worked with who soon discovered the harsh realities of a labour market that didn't value nor want them.

In this auto ethnographic action research study I developed, managed and taught in three engagement programs with teacher and community youth stakeholders across three mainstream secondary school sites involving over 200 marginalised young people. All three programs succeeded in improving school retention and are still active today but only one program empowered students to be active participants in their community, offering them transition pathways into university, TAFE, apprenticeships and work.

In Lesson 1, I came to understand that teachers, parents and community youth stakeholders are the agents best placed to effect educational change for students with a disability in a large country secondary school. Through collaborative school and community based activism I was able to mobilise the voices of parent, teacher and community youth stakeholders to improve resourcing, curriculum options and work related opportunities for students. This action resulted in significant structural inclusion and vocational pedagogical change for the students with disabilities.

In Lesson 2 providing an after-hours regional second chance schooling option drew over forty young people back into formalised learning. However, offering a vocational curriculum embedded in casual or part-time work expectations proved to be an inadequate option for those students unable to gain employment. There was significant structural and cultural change evident in this schooling program but little pedagogical and curricular rigour.

In Lesson 3 I oriented senior secondary schooling within an adult education environment geographically removed from the mainstream school campus. This second chance senior schooling program involved young people, teachers and community stakeholders in a continual negotiation of school structures, culture, pedagogy and curriculum. This approach

(re)engaged over 150 young people back into the SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) over three years. By investigating the nature of the community-school nexus and using community as a curriculum resource, students were offered greater learning authenticity and opportunity, presenting some answers to the question; how can I (a teacher), (re)engage marginalised young people back into learning in the official senior school curriculum?

The difficulty with the first two engagement initiatives was neoliberal public policy as it manifested in South Australia's version of local school management and in my practice. For me, a way through the neoliberal quagmire came only through participation in an Australian Education Union (AEU) funded and university led Professional Learning Community (PLC). This dialogic community offered me thinking space, intellectual challenge and rich conversation with teacher colleagues and university partners to wrestle with and enact critical educational social theory and practice.

Through my involvement in this PLC and my subsequent enactment of engaging and rigorous pedagogical practices I was able to work 'against the grain' of the existing neoliberal policy logic as it played out in schools and in my mind. This required a move to socially just critical praxis in my work with teacher colleagues, students, parents and community youth stakeholders to embed structural, cultural, curricula and pedagogical democratic schooling purpose within the final engagement initiative.

## **Frequently used acronyms and educational terms**

**ACARA** (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) - an independent authority that is responsible, among other things, for publishing nationally comparable data on Australian schools in the My School website.

**Category of Disadvantage-** All DECS schools are given a category of disadvantage level based upon a combination of socio-economic factors. Category 1 is allocated to the most disadvantaged schools ranging up to category 7 schools which are generally situated in advantaged SES communities.

**DEEWR** (Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations) which comes under the ministerial jurisdiction of the Deputy Prime Minister, Ms Julia Gillard.

**EEO** (The South Australian Equal Opportunity Act) 1984 states that it is unlawful for anyone to be treated unfairly on the grounds of age, sex, marital status, sexuality, race, physical or intellectual impairment.

**ESL** (English as a Second Language) is an acronym for young people who have English as a second language

**Exclusion** is a DECS discipline policy involving a one term or often 10 week absence from the school spent by many students at home watching TV or out on the streets doing other activities.

**Futures Connect** (DECS) is a package of learning opportunities and transition services encompassing: • Enterprise and vocational learning • Vocational education and training in schools • Career and transition services. It provides more flexible learning choices and support services for students who are at risk of leaving school early, or who have already left school.

**G Cars** are government plated cars

**ICANs** (Innovative Community Action Networks)- they bring together young people, families, schools, community groups, businesses and different levels of government to find solutions to local issues that prevent young people from completing their education.

**Lifeworld-** that site in time and space in which we all live, sometimes referred to as everyday life. In a similar vein, Roche (1987) defines the lifeworld as 'the social world as subjectively experienced, and communicated, as acted in and acted upon' (p. 283).

**Mayer Key Competencies**-were identified as the basic transferable competencies that underpin employability and the capacity to adapt to different types of whole work roles, as well as personal and community activities throughout an individual's life. They are named after Eric Mayer, who in 1992 presented "The Key Competencies Report".

**NAPLAN** (National Assessment of Performance in Literacy and Numeracy) in Australia, a federal requirement for all schools in Australia to administer for students in years 3, 5 7 and 9.

**NEP** (The Negotiated Education Plan) is a mandated DECS requirement for students identified as eligible for funding support under the DECS Students with Disabilities Policy.

**P21** (Partnerships 21) is the South Australian model of local management.

**PALLs** (Principals as Literacy Leaders) is a current collaborative pilot (2009-2011) between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, the Australian Primary Principals Association, three universities and 60 government and non-government schools in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

**RPiN** (Redesigning Pedagogies in the North) was a collaborative University of South Australia, Social Inclusion, AEU (Australian Education Union) and NASSPN (Northern Adelaide Secondary Schools Principals Network) action research project (2005-2007) that sought to offer a new story about pedagogies of engagement in middle schooling across some of Adelaide's most disadvantaged northern suburbs secondary schools.

**RTOs** (Registered Training Organisations) provide nationally recognised training and assessment services which meet national quality assurance standards. They can deliver, assess and issue parchments for nationally recognised courses and qualifications, are eligible to apply for State and Commonwealth Government funding for training.

**SACE** (the South Australian Certificate of Education)- the end point credential of schooling

**SACSA** (South Australian Curriculum Standards and Assessment) framework is the official outcomes-based curriculum framework used in South Australia to determine what is to be taught across the eight prescribed learning areas from reception to year 10

**SA Works** (South Australia) was a State Government funding initiative to support regional partnerships for employment creation.

**Shadowlands** is a word I have used to describe marginalised school life for students who are socially excluded from schooling by their peers, teachers, curriculum and pedagogy. It is taken from the novelist CS Lewis.

**SILA** (Supporting Improved Literacy Achievement) is a collaborative pilot between the Australian Government, the Department of Education and Children's Services South Australia, seeking to improve literacy outcomes in 32 low SES schools through amongst other things, using leadership coaches as a way of building a focus on educational leadership in schools.

**Social exclusion** describes a situation in which a person (or a group of people), resident in a society is excluded from the key activities of the society, and is prevented from participation by factors beyond his or her control. Most often, social exclusion can happen when a person is faced with problems like poor health, unemployment, inadequate housing, crime or discrimination. The process of overcoming such deprivation is referred to as social inclusion ([eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002](http://eurohealthnet.eu/research/health-social-inclusion-2002)).

**Social Inclusion Initiative** was established in South Australia in 2002 by Premier Mike Rann. The focus of the Initiative was on providing the South Australian Government with advice on innovative ways to address some of the most difficult social problems (including educational) across the South Australian community.

**SSO** (School Services Officer) is a DECS School Support Officer often used in Special Education to offer teachers extra adult support for students with disabilities to be able to participate in the mainstream curriculum.

**SWD** (Students with Disabilities) is a DECS term. Students with Disabilities are labelled as such after a guidance assessment is made and they are found to have an intellectual disability, language or speech delay, or physical impairment.

**SWDs Policy** (The DECS Students with Disabilities Policy) is based on the legislative requirements specified in the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1991) and the Disability Education Standards (2005).

**VET** (Vocational Education and Training)

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### **Artefacts**

- 1        The action research cycles
- 2        Enrolment interview guides
- 3        DECS diagnostic review of SCCC
- 4        Student magazine

### **Bibliography**



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