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‘Students that just hate school wouldn’t go’: educationally disengaged and disadvantaged young people’s talk about university education

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This paper contributes to a growing body of literature on widening university participation and brings a focus on the classed and embodied nature of young people’s imagination to existing discussions. We interviewed 250 young people living in disadvantaged communities across five Australian states who had experienced disengagement from compulsory primary and secondary schooling. We asked them about their education and their educational futures, specifically how they imagined universities and university participation. For these young people, universities were imagined as ‘big’, ‘massive’ alienating schools. The paper explores how the elements of schooling from which these young people disengaged became tangible barriers to imagining and pursuing participation in university education. The primary barrier they described was their relationships with school teachers. Our analysis shows how relationships with teachers can impact the imagined improbability/probability of university participation. We offer suggestions for how barriers to university created by poor relationships with teachers may be overcome.

Keywords: imagination; university participation; school disengagement; disadvantage; teacher–student relationships

Introduction

Educationally disengaged young people are often not included in discussions about increasing university targets (Harwood et al. 2013), as efforts to ‘widen university participation’ tend to concentrate on the ‘school’ and, by consequence, school attenders. The importance of the school to widening participation initiatives is underscored by the UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013), which points out that ‘what happens in schools ultimately holds the key to who can participate in higher education’ (2). Yet ‘what happens in schools’ pertains not only to those attending; it also

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involves those who have become disengaged. We seek to address this gap by describing educationally disengaged young people's perceptions of, and related barriers to, university.

Internationally, the youth studies literature as well as government policies regarding youth who are neither in employment, education or training (NEET) point to reasons for non-participation in further education. Despite the NEET category being problematised as inappropriately homogeneous, there is some consensus that low academic achievement, school disaffection and belonging to low socio-economic groups respectively affects the likelihood of entering this demographic (for example, Chen 2011; Maguire and Thompson 2007; Pemberton 2008). However, there is less research into how inequality in education may contribute to the transition from school to NEET status (Thompson 2011). Here we build on Pemberton's (2008) argument that lack of teacher support leads to some youth entering NEET status, to consider the impact of student-teacher relationships on young people's imaginings of university.

Our research investigated how young people with precarious relationships to education (who have left school or are in a precarious relationship with it) imagined university (Harwood et al. 2013). While we sought to understand a young person's connection with school (e.g. are you attending/when did you leave) we did not pose questions about teachers. However, a finding surprised our research team: there was significant talk about teachers and the influence of teachers on imaginings of further education. As we will outline, negative experiences of the teacher-student relationship in high school had debilitating effects on participants' imaginings of future education; an influence that, in their view, rendered university participation improbable. Yet while negative teacher-student relationship is established as related to educational disengagement (Duffy and Elwood 2013; Hattam and Smyth 2003; Humphry 2013; Lumby 2012), examination of the impact on students' imaginings of universities is, to our knowledge, still absent. The role that imagination plays in developing educational biographies and facilitating social mobility seems profound, and as such our theoretical work begins to explicate the significance of imagination.

This paper seeks to bring the voices, educational experiences and imaginings of young people at the margins of tertiary education into literature on educational disengagement. These 'margins' are better described as 'dead zones'; a point emphasised by Harwood et al. (2013), who point out that existing outreach programmes aimed at widening university participation generally target low socio-economic status (LSES) children and young people engaged in schooling, and that attending to the needs of young people who experience exclusion or disengagement from schooling is a 'dead zone' in widening participation scholarship and practice. This issue is also flagged by David Watson, who notes:

... we have a lot of hand-wringing about completion, persistence, or retention (as well as their reciprocals, drop-out and wastage). But the big picture is that we don't talk enough about re-starting or re-engagement ... There are serious issues here for social mobility. Is HE simply a sorting device or does it have transformative possibilities? Unless it begins to deliver the latter, its social effects will be regressive. (2006, 3)

Re-engaging disengaged young people with education should be the focus of widening participation. Only a few studies have worked with non-university attendees from disadvantaged communities and asked them their thoughts on university participation (for example, Archer, Hollingworth, and Halsall 2007; Fuller, Heath, and Johnston 2011; Greenhalgh, Seyan, and Boynton 2004; Harwood et al. 2013). However, disadvantaged young people's understandings and imaginings of university education are still under-represented in research on widening participation.

In seeking to address this under-representation, we interrogate the impact that teacher–student relationships in compulsory schooling have on educationally disadvantaged young people's imaginings of university participation. Barriers to university that stemmed from negative teacher–student relationships include young people being told that they 'weren't smart enough' and they should 'quit school'. Such experiences are often magnified by the imagination. This stronghold effect of the imaginary occurs because these young people rarely visit a university, or conceive university as a 'new' idea for their educational futures. Instead, their understandings and imaginings of university are indistinguishable from ideas of how they have experienced and disengaged from compulsory schooling. We begin by briefly outlining contemporary debates about university access and participation. We then describe the Imagining University Education study. This leads to our discussion of the issues of schooling that affected the young people's imaginings of university education.

Accessing university?

Literature on social inclusion in tertiary education is fractured and complex, with many contributions focusing on studies of universities and university students. This includes, for instance: studies of the university and its role in knowledge-tapping for the wider national and global economies (for example, Engle and Tinto 2008); the inequities inherent in university structures (for example, Thompson and Bekhradnia 2012); debates regarding best practices for widening participation (for example, Bowles 2010); and the effects of widening participation on university quality (for example, Amaral and Magalhaes 2003; Barrett 1998; Duke 1992). There is an abundance of reports regarding enrolled 'non-traditional university students' and their

rates of participation (for example, *Race for Opportunity* 2010; *Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission* 2013), transition concerns (for example, Engle and Tinto 2008; Tym et al. 2004), retention (for example, Andres and Carpenter 1997; Chen 2005; Jackson, Ajayi, and Quiggley 2005; Munro 2011), achievement (for example, *Action on Access* 2003; Chen 2005; Engle and Tinto 2008) and career development (Doyle 2011). Many such studies draw on documentation, policies and statistics generated through the university admission and record-keeping processes. There are also studies that generate empirical data gathered at the university access point (entry to degrees; for example, Bornholt, Gientzotis, and Cooney 2004; Kim 2011) and beyond (academic performance and experiences of the non-traditional university student; for example, Bufton 2003; Chen 2005; Christie 2009; Jackson, Ajayi, and Quigley 2005). The data examined in these studies exclude the perspectives of youth who have never been to university.

Gale and Tranter (2011) position widening participation as the most recent turn in a series of historical policy moves to improve access to university education in Australian contexts; a discursive trajectory characterised by a focus on social justice. If discourse and policy differentiate the widening participation agenda from its predecessors, then Shaw et al. (2007) make a significant contribution to the widening participation literature. Their extensive literature review highlighted ‘widening participation’ as a problematic and vague term that may be understood and addressed from several different paradigms, which each have very different effects. They make the point that widening participation holds particular, contrasting concerns for policy-makers, university management, university teaching staff and students (Shaw et al. 2007). Bourke (2012) offers another critique of the widening participation agenda but focuses on the restrictive nature of the assumptions and language of ‘widening participation’, ‘barriers’ to participation, ‘raising young people’s aspirations’, and discursive constructions of the university student.

School teachers attract minimal, but generally positive, comment in this literature. Worton (2010) considers the role of teachers in widening participation in terms of opportunities from high school curriculum being co-designed by universities and schools (to increase relevance and continuity of high school studies and university studies). Some research has positioned the social capital of teachers as positively impacting state school students’ choices to attend prestigious universities (for example, Curtis et al. 2008). In contrast, a report on the university participation of young people in care in the United Kingdom placed their negative schooling experiences with teachers who doubted their abilities as motivation for pursuing higher education to prove those teachers wrong (Jackson, Ajayi, and Quiggley 2005).

Aspirations and imagination

The imperative to make higher education more inclusive has seen a growing emphasis on the concept of aspirations, with LSES people typically depicted as having ‘low aspirations’. This has been critiqued (Kenway and Hickey Moody 2011; Sellar, Gale, and Parker 2011; Sinclair, McKendrick, and Scott 2010) with concern raised over the emphasis on neoliberal discourses (Raco 2009), through which structural factors causing low aspirations are elided and the hopes and aspirations of LSES children and families are misinterpreted. Appadurai’s theory of the capacity to aspire and his notion that ‘the capacity to aspire is a ... navigational capacity’ (2004, 69) are useful here, as in his view aspiration is connected to having the requisite aspiration window. Thus ‘low aspiration’ is better understood as a navigational capacity where the capacity to aspire is underpinned by the resources to which an individual has access; resources that are not only material, but also imaginative. For Appadurai, the imagination is connected to processes of change in contemporary life – the effects of globalisation and the influence of a media-rich world, and Appadurai (1996) argues that through the social imagination people are able to imagine different possibilities in new ways.

Ideas of material as well as imaginative aspects to aspiration clear a space to consider the importance of imagining educational futures. To imagine, for instance, completing schooling or going to university. Two thinkers we draw on to develop this idea are Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis. Both describe a type of imagination that produces (Arendt) or is radical (Castoriadis). Drawing on Arendt, Zerilli (2005a, 2005b) describes two types of imagination, delineating between productive imagination and reproductive imagination. The reproductive imagination draws on existing knowledge and reproduces images; by contrast, the productive imagination is where new ideas are formed. As Arendt (1981, 86) explains, ‘in the productive imagination, elements from the visible world are rearranged, and this is possible because the elements, now so freely handled, have already gone through the de-sensing process of thinking’. Taking this Arentian view, such an act of thinking is pivotal to a productive imagination, suggesting that young people who have had difficulties with schooling need opportunities to think differently about educational futures in order to produce imagination of these. The ‘radical imagination’ described by Castoriadis (1997a) alerts us to the need to imagine ‘defiantly’ (Kenway and Fahey 2009). As we outline in the last section of this paper, this provides a way to think through what is involved in imagining education differently, and how to grapple with the relationships to which one has been subjugated.

Appadurai’s (1996, 2004) account draws out not only the problem of the so-called ‘success’ (read here low success) narratives of educational future aspirations for LSES young people (Sellar, Gale, and Parker 2011). His

work also lays the ground for challenging stereotyped ‘low aspiration’ narratives; narratives that are, in our view, mistakenly applied to LSES young people; narratives that miss the vital importance of considering not only the issues of material barriers, but also those of the imagination.

The study

The Imagining University Education project focused on imaginings of university from young people who have difficult relationships to education and who live in communities in comparable LSES regions of Australia. These areas all had low rates of university participation. Two hundred and fifty young people, aged between 11 and 18, were interviewed for this national, Australian project.

Study sites comprised a range of urban, suburban and regional settings across five Australian states (Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland). Site selection was based on whether the site: had proportionately low rates of undergraduate participation by persons aged 18–20 (Birrell et al. 2008); was LSES (ABS 2013; Vinson 2007); rated highly on indicators of disadvantage health, community safety, economic factors and education (Vinson 2007); had high rates of behavioural problems; and had school engagement problems as indicated by school non-attendance rates, rates of school non-completion to Year 12, and attendance and absenteeism intervention programmes (Department for Education and Children’s Services 2010; New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2009; Stehlik 2006). Participants were recruited through youth sector and related agencies, with youth professionals often joining interviews.

Across these sites young people were interviewed using semi-structured interviews in youth settings such as youth centres. Interviews featured questions specifically designed to work with imagination (Harwood et al. 2013), including asking participants to close their eyes and feel and imagine what a university would be like. Transcripts were transcribed and uploaded to QSR NVivo™ for thematic analysis.

School and university: ‘same difference, just bigger’

Key to our argument about the function of the imaginary in solidifying the school and schoolteachers as barriers to university participation is the premise that, for these young people, ‘the university’ is not an idea that offers new possibilities. Rather, their construal of the ‘university’ was inextricable from, and indeed synonymous with, their old ideas and experiences of compulsory schooling.

When asked to describe what they saw when they imagined ‘university’, the young people generally described images of a ‘big’ school:

- L: A bigger school. ...
T: A quiet, studying, big scarier environment.
S: Boarding school.
T: I'd say bigger version of school like, high school. (Logan, Tammy and Serena, aged 15, regional Queensland)

Just a big school I guess ... kind of like this but more coordinated. (Zane, aged 16, regional Victoria)

Scary ... A giant school. (Lucette, aged 14, outer city, South Australia)

In the above excerpts, the scale of universities is construed as 'big', 'giant' and 'scary'. This notion of universities being overwhelmingly and discouragingly magnified schools permeated the data. There were some exceptions; for example,

Ruth perceived the 'bigness' of university to be potentially liberating:

- R: I imagine university just the same as high school.
E: Yes like school.
R: But more freedom I guess.
E: Yes, more – it's bigger. (Ruth and Edith, aged 16 and 17, regional Queensland)

Regardless of whether the emotive response to the 'bigness' of university was positive or negative, the perception of university as a large-scale school prevailed. This lack of differentiation between schools and universities is problematic; and had a confounding effect on these young people's capacity to imagine and pursue university participation. If schools and universities are the same, how can young people talk of or imagine universities differently to their experiences of compulsory schooling?

My experience at high school was terrible. [laughter] I hated high school. It was the worst experience I probably could have had as a child growing up. I got bullied at school, I had no friends, I barely had anybody to talk to ... I kept going to teachers and stuff – it just started becoming so frequent that they didn't really care too much so I was pretty distracted. I didn't do too well on my HSC [Higher School Certificate] so I was pretty disappointed. If I could do it all over again I'd definitely change high schools. (Carter, aged 18, outer city, New South Wales)

I guess I really dislike school. I find it's just really easy for them to get rid of you ... they don't really try to keep you in there like they'll probably just get rid of you as soon as they can. That's why they pretty much sent me here (to a youth service). (Megan, aged 17, regional New South Wales)

As in Megan's quote above, memories of negative schooling experiences often include references to teachers as 'them' and/or 'they', teachers seem

to embody all that is inaccessible and unfair about the structures of schooling and their educational experiences. Indeed negative experiences of school underscored young participants' general resistances to 'perpetual schooling' via bigger schools (that is, university or further education):

By the time we get to Grade 12 or even Grade 10, we're just, we're not wanting to learn more, we just want to get on with our lives and start actually living our lives instead of just learning our lives. (Jye, aged 14, inner city, Tasmania)

No. I hate school. I've done 13 years of school and I don't need any more; I'm quite all right thank you. (Billy, aged 18, outer city, New South Wales)

M: [who'd] want another couple of years of schooling?

Z: I'd kill myself literally ... If I had to go to school for another few years, I'd be like 'Oh my God'. (Melody and Zac, aged 16 and 15, outer city, South Australia)

Disengagement from school is seen on a continuum to non-engagement with a bigger school (the university). Indeed, the prospect of more, 'bigger' school is so abhorrent that Zac joked of 'killing himself' rather than engaging with it.

A magnification of subjugation: teachers at school and universities filled with teachers

Striking in the accounts of the teacher–student relationship was the way that this element of their relationship to schooling was extrapolated to 'big school', or, as otherwise known, the university. For instance, the young people's talk was concurrently filled with stories of subjugation and disengagement from compulsory education that centred on the teacher–student relationship. Universities were nothing other than big schools that are densely populated with teachers. It seems that the teacher–student relationships described by these young people, and their talk of 'teachers', are imaginative barriers to university participation. They are, to draw on Arendt (1981), relying on their reproductive imagination of school to imagine the university. Most did not know people who had been to university and had no other way of knowing.

While the teacher–student relationship is well established as a reason for disengagement from education (Duffy and Elwood 2013; Hattam and Smyth 2003; Humphry 2013; Lumby 2012; Smyth and McInerney 2006), it is little commented upon in relation to access to university. In this regard, the student–teacher relationship and young people's views of this relationship are subjugated forms of knowledge within the university access literature. These forms of knowledge are of value to our discussion for accentuating the importance of listening out for practices of schooling that impact access to

university. Foucault describes subjugated knowledges in ‘Two Lectures’ as bereft of ‘expertise’ and ‘qualification’:

... by subjugated knowledges one should understand something else, something which in a sense is altogether different, namely, a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity ... (1980, 82)

Through disqualification, these subjugated knowledges offer a different perspective to dominating knowledge of ‘low aspiration’. At times the young people’s comments reflected a ‘disrupting’ discourse about education and teachers; at others, their comments picked up on mainstream debates about good schools versus bad schools. For us, the key point has been to take account of these as views and experiences of education that are, in the main, subjugated by a very dominating, a very powerful discourse of university and university participation. Certainly, these subjugated knowledges can help those of us who have made it in the university to grasp to the complexity of navigating imagination windows (Appadurai 2004). Most importantly, subjugated knowledges provide us with tools to see the impact of the imagination, as well as the material world, on educational futures.

The discussions of the young people in our study suggest that teachers are not considered ‘normal adults’ (Xavier, aged 17, regional New South Wales), but rather (and alarmingly) uncaring, aggressive or strange versions of adults with the power to significantly impact their education. The young people’s descriptions of schooling typically featured teachers as individuals who were authoritarian, apathetic, unsupportive, uncaring, unjust, aggressive, unreasonable and, at times, ‘hateful’ humiliators. These sorts of descriptions are consistent with findings from studies that sought to understand school disengagement from the student perspective (for example, Humphry 2013; Lumby 2012; McGregor and Mills 2011; Te Riele 2011). The following excerpts from the data exemplify some of the negative teacher–student relationships the young people described:

... it gets a bit frustrating with the teachers and sometimes when you have arguments with your teachers it wrecks your education so you can’t learn in the class without the teacher having a go at you. (Cassie, aged 13, outer city, New South Wales)

They [the teachers at school X] didn’t understand us.

I:¹ As in they were really bossy?

No, they couldn’t support you in any way ...

The teachers never explained anything.

... like I was going through really bad depression and they couldn't support me in any way so they just kicked me out, pretty much, got rid of me. I just couldn't deal with it before that anyway. They were just dickheads.

They cared more about the uniform.

Yes, they care more about the uniform than your actual work. How does a hoodie affect how you do your work? ...

I got suspended for wearing black socks. I got suspended for two weeks for wearing black socks and the reason I got suspended was because I said to [the teacher] 'I can't afford it. I can't afford to buy myself a new pair of white socks to just come to school'. Then she said that I was being rude to her and she suspended me for two weeks. (Group interview, aged 16–18, regional Victoria)

C: A teacher. He literally said 'You're not smart enough for university'.

S: I got told to drop out of school but I didn't.

I: They told you to drop out?

S: I told them to go and get 'effed'.

I: Well said. That's not very nice. (Casey and Sarah, aged 14 and 15, outer city, South Australia)

The point to be made here is that, when asked why they left school, experiences of teachers were often identified by the young people as impacting their reasoning and decision-making:

I: You got up to Year 11, that's pretty good so what makes you decide to leave?

A: The teachers. (Alex, aged 17, regional New South Wales)

I just left because I got sick of the teachers. (Bronwyn, aged 15, regional Victoria)

Most people I know they've just left because of the teachers. (Paul, aged 15, outer city, South Australia)

It wasn't the work. It was more the teachers. It was Lexon; Lexon was a shit school. (Evie, aged 16, regional Victoria)

This final quote is interesting because it demonstrates how the young people presented their assessment of teachers as synonymous with their assessment of their education. Bad teachers equalled a bad education:

T: Yes, I was like an A grade student in Year 7 and then I went from A to D ...

I: What did they do to you in high school? They didn't do a good job did they ...

T: No. I grew up in a really country town – the education there isn't the best so ... it was all right in primary school ... So when I hit high school it was kind of everyone running feral, the teachers were quite feral to be honest. I remember this one time in school camp we went – they were absolutely horrible. It wasn't the best education. I think if I actually grew up down here I'd still be in school. (Tilly, aged 15, outer city, South Australia)

Whilst, perhaps predictably, teachers were positioned as the catalyst for school disengagement, the young people were not simply 'teacher bashing' or demonising teachers. On the contrary, just as there was acknowledgement that 'bad teachers equals bad education', there were more often assertions that 'good teachers equals good education':

Well, I didn't like Gracefields because it just wasn't a good school – I remember that. I don't really remember Blue Point but Westside was a good school; that was a good school and then Elmtree was a good school as well; the teachers were pretty cool but some of them weren't very nice. Anyway, there was a good teacher there and everything; it was a good education. (Joslyn, aged 12, outer city, New South Wales)

My primary school was Edgeway Primary. It was okay. I didn't really like it that much. I was only there for like a year. I used to live in Acacia. It was close though; it was around the corner so it was easy. My high school, I went to Johns Secondary. It was really good. I really liked it but I stopped going quite a lot; I really regret not going now because it was such a good school with really good teachers. (Dalia, aged 18, inner city, Victoria)

This [alternative] school is cool. The teachers – they've got your back on everything. (Alula, aged 17, outer city, New South Wales)

These participants demonstrate the capacity to give honest and generous feedback on the quality of their teachers. This included empathy for teachers, with some excusing the teacher's actions that led to their disengagement from education:

Just some kids get overwhelmed by school or some just have learning difficulties that, and teachers can't pick up in a class of 22 or 20 students and that's fair enough that they can't go around to every student and they shouldn't have to, like some students can work independently and just get it done but it's others that have problems and they're the ones that need to be more focused on to try and build up their self confidence or education and just normal ... yeah because otherwise you get led into trouble. (Jye, aged 14, inner city, Tasmania)

As in Jacky Lumby's (2012, 272) study with educationally disengaged young people, the participants in this study 'were not incapable of positive relations [with teachers] but did not enjoy them universally'. Whilst the above quotes show that young people were able to see that teachers were

not quintessentially ‘bad’, their schooling experiences frequently featured negative teacher–student relationships that worked to exclude them from mainstream education. Given these negative experiences, it is concerning that the understanding of ‘university as big school’ generated understandings of universities as ‘filled’ with teachers:

- I: ... So if I asked you to describe a university – I know you’ve never been but what do you imagine a university to look like?
 W: Big building, lot of kids, lot of teachers. That’s it. (Wendell, aged 15, remote New South Wales)
 I: If you went there and had a look – if you all turned up at uni today what might you see?

[Overtalk]

- I: Teachers, yes. (Focus group of young women, aged 14–18, outer city, South Australia)

I reckon [at university] they just sit in class and the teacher is up there talking and you’re just writing notes. (Addison, aged 15, outer city, New South Wales)

These imaginings question why young people would want to engage with a place they believed to be so similar to their negative experiences of teachers and schooling. One young person summed-up the conundrum neatly: when asked whether she would consider going to university, she replied ‘No, because I hate school, I hate teachers and I couldn’t stand doing like four years of university’ (Merrin, aged 16, regional New South Wales). Clearly, educationally disengaged young people’s understandings and experiences of schoolteachers are potential barriers to university participation.

The conundrum of imagining universities differently

As we have shown, university is imagined by young people in the most disadvantaged and educationally disengaged circumstances (Harwood et al. 2013). The problem is not that higher education is beyond imagination, but rather how it is imagined. For the young people in our study, ‘how’ university was imagined was reliant on their experiences of teachers and schooling. This resulted in the young people firmly resisting the thought of engaging with university, especially a university they imagined as a large-scale school filled with schoolteachers.

Encouragingly, there were a few of the young people (six out of 250) who imagined a university with teachers who were different from those they had experienced at school:

- A: It's like a high school with instead of having gaol gates – just like a nice lovely wall that students can leave in and out of cause they're trusted.
- C: Not like a prison cell ...
- R: The teachers are more relaxed. A lot more relaxed and they actually want to teach you something. (Adam, Cameron and Ronin, aged 13–15, regional New South Wales)
- E: They [teachers at university] treat you like you're an adult, not a two year old.
- B: Yes, they do. They treat you very differently. They actually put it down to 'You're an adult' not 'Oh you're just some kid' ...
- E: More sophisticated educational level.
- B: Yes.
- E: ... than having the teacher sit in a classroom and yell at you.
- B: It's more of a friendly environment as well. They're a lot more personal and up-close and willing to really help you ... (Eileen and Bethany, aged 17 and 18, outer city, New South Wales)

I mean, you're meeting people and you talk to other people, you get to develop bonds with your teachers, with your mates, with your new friends. Uni is a pretty advanced thing ... (Chad, aged 18, outer city, New South Wales)

Imagining the possibility of 'developing bonds' with and gaining 'respect' from university teachers, it seems, was possible but rare for the young people who participated in this study.

As Vincent and Ball (2007) have argued, middle-class families perform concerted work to achieve educational aspirations. We are not suggesting that middle-class young people do not need to imagine their educational futures. Rather, we construe their capacity for imagining themselves at university as extended by the concerted aspirational work and narratives their families impart. In this way, middle-class young people's capacity to accurately imagine a university education is better resourced by external factors than the imaginings of young people whose families might not have the social and economic resources to do such 'concerted work'. Returning to Arendt (1981) it could be argued that this middle-class success is the work of a reproductive imagination, and the fact that often some family members have had successful experiences of university and these experiences provide components that can be part of reproductive imaginative work.

By contrast, in the contexts experienced by the young people in our study, new ways and additional resources are needed to support re-imagining university in positive ways (i.e. ways that can support the possibility of engagement, as opposed to foreclosure). This does not mean responsibilising families to produce these resources; such resources should be publically produced and promoted. Provocatively, we propose this might include a storying of university that distances it from school education. The person one

becomes at university is much more than the person one is allowed to be at school, and this needs to be highlighted in public discourse.

Universities need to take initiatives to connect with LSES schools and model responsive student–teacher relationships. They also need to gesture towards an education beyond, and conceptually outside, schooling. Relying on school experiences alone, as our findings demonstrate, serves to deter all but a few young people with precarious relationships to education from entertaining the idea of continuing with education.

Significantly, however, this is not to suggest that the way to overcoming social barriers to university is merely to ‘imagine’ oneself back into school. Responding to concerns such as those raised by Thompson (2011), this is not a move to individualise the social and educational exclusion of young people, especially those who are not engaged in education and employment. Neither is it the case that working-class young people need to better ‘imagine university’. The problem lies in the structural factors that not only support the everyday materiality of lives, but also the imaginations of having an education. The latter, we argue, is too often overlooked and needs to be addressed through popular media and public cultural forms of engagement.

Drawing on Castoriadis, Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey make the case for ‘a defiant research imagination’ (2009, 114), arguing the distinction between a ‘compliant research imagination’ and a ‘defiant’ one. The former, they suggest, citing Castoriadis (1994, 319–320) is ‘... imitative, reproductive, or combinatory imagination’. They go on to provide this exemplar: ‘what Mill saw when he critiqued many of his fellow sociologists for their “dogmatic commitment” and “methodological inhibition”’ (Kenway and Fahey 2009, 114; citing Mill 1959 [2000], 232). Distinct from this is what Castoriadis terms the radical imagination. This ‘is what makes it possible for any being-for-itself ... to create for itself an own ... world within which it also posits itself’ (Castoriadis 1997b, 326). For Kenway and Fahey this signals a defiant imagination, one that in theirs and Castoriadis’s words:

... includes a relationship to knowledge that is not ‘simply a question of developing the individual’s faculties and capacities’ but of changing their ‘relation to authority ... the institution and everything that the *institution represents as a fixed and final point of reference*’. (Kenway and Fahey 2009, 114–115; emphasis added; citing Castoriadis, 1968, 154)

This point of changing the relationship to authority is tantalising, for while Castoriadis (1968, 125) is writing about the university student uprisings in France in May 1968, his concern with authority is evocative of the powerful forces that can distance students from their teachers and indeed from the university and its opportunities for learning. Castoriadis’s emphasis here is on transformation:

... what is involved is the transformation of the relationship between teacher and student; the transformation, too, of the content of teaching; the elimination of the tendency to partition off each academic discipline from all others and the university from society. (1993, 154)

Taking cues from Castoriadis (1993), transformation could be argued to require not only student–teacher relationships, but also teaching contexts as well as the relationship between university and society. Thus, while in our study the issues with teachers were repeatedly emphasised, it is also, we believe, necessary to take account of related contextual factors that impact teacher–student relationships.

Building on the work of Kenway and Fahey (2009), we argue that, contrary to their middle-class peers, working-class students with precarious relationships to education are in much greater need of a defiant imagination of education. We might therefore conceptualise the difference in the imaginative work required of these young people in a positive way. Their task in engaging a productive imagination demands, to paraphrase Arendt (1981), acts of thinking that can rearrange elements from their worlds. This would be an approach that sincerely respects the degree of effort that is necessary to think differently about the very space that has scared you in order that you may decide to enter it. Theirs is a task of taking on the orthodoxy of an institution, one that, as our study suggests, sees the university and its teachers as far too similar to the disconcerting reality of their schooling.

This is not to suggest that working-class young people with precarious relationships to education need to do more work to catch up with their middle-class peers – or that they should be held responsible for their precarious relationships. This is not to place responsibility for crossing the line between social and educational exclusion and inclusion with each young person's imaginative skills. Indeed, we are critical of the educational processes that have failed to include and support the young people in this study. Rather, it is to acknowledge a different type of imaginative work, and in so doing to take account of the need to find ways to support this endeavour.

Young people from disadvantaged communities who are disengaged from education imagine university as completely tangled-up with old ideas of their experiences of compulsory schooling. In this regard, new ideas are important for creating imaginaries of educational participation – and navigating towards out-of-reach aspirational windows. For educationally excluded young people, without access to higher education narratives (such as through family, school or friends), imagining educational futures requires new ideas to be created. Importantly, they need to have shared with them the knowledge that educational futures can most certainly differ from schooling.

Conclusion: marketing the ‘secret’ good things about higher education?

So far we have painted a reasonably bleak affective landscape, as we have highlighted the problem and prevalence of conceiving university as a ‘big’ school, especially in terms of it limiting young people’s capacity to imagine university participation. But we would like to propose a possibility for a way forward.

Differentiation is a key principle of many successful service brand campaigns (Grace and O’Cass 2005). In Australia, one the most notable of these campaigns at the moment is the ‘more of this, less of this’ campaign by the National Australia Bank. This campaign juxtaposes iconic hero and villain pop-culture characters to explicate the National Australia Bank’s ‘More Give, Less Take’ tag-line (e.g. more of Dorothy, less of the Wicked Witch of the West).² From our conversations with young people, we can suggest that a juxtaposition of university and schools was pedagogically effective in terms of disrupting the idea of university as a big school.

In our interviews with the young people, the interviewer opened a discussion about what university was like and offered to answer questions they may have about university. One of the amazing things that were pedagogically effective in these discussions was when the interviewers offered direct comparisons between university and school. The interviewers did this simply by highlighting the difference between the two in terms of: weeks of attendance per year (26 at university versus 40 at school); the number and flexibility of face-to-face teaching hours per week (12 at university versus 30 at school – so you can work and study); curriculum content (mandated school content versus studying within your chosen field at university, e.g. if you do not like mathematics you do not have to do it); disciplinary differences (learning and attendance is your responsibility, versus suspensions and expulsions at school); physical differences (campuses often have cafes, bars, post offices, shops, food halls; schools are private property but most Australian universities are public spaces so you can just walk in and check it out); and social differences (student unions, O-week parties, social calendars). In some cases this moved young people from disinterest to curiosity in terms of what universities can offer, and sometimes a resolution to attend.

The use of juxtapositions via market differentiation campaigns may be an effective tactic when promoting universities to potential non-traditional students. Such marketing might create positive affective landscapes of higher education. The main aim of such marketing could, and should, be differentiating university from schools in a way that disrupts understandings of ‘university as a big school’ and makes pursuing educational futures at university an attractive and achievable option. We would call for those responsible for marketing the widening participation agenda to strongly consider marketing efforts that differentiate schoolteachers from university teaching.

Finally, we recommend that universities recognise conversations with LSES and that educationally disengaged students are a crucial part of their widening participation work (Harwood and Allan 2014; Harwood et al. 2013). We have described the subjugated knowledge of these LSES young people with difficult relationships with schooling, especially in terms of how they understand university and one perceived barrier to university participation (i.e. their negative relationships with school teachers). We challenge widening participation professionals to ensure that this knowledge does not remain subjugated. In so doing, we hope more work is enacted with these young people to ensure that ‘widening participation’ includes serious consideration of how to reconnect young people with education. Widening participation should not focus solely on furthering the education of those who are already in educational systems.

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Notes

1. We use ‘I’ to indicate ‘interviewer’. The research interviewers included two of the authors as well as graduate students participating in research within the larger project or who were employed as research assistants.
2. See video clip online: <http://www.adnews.com.au/campaign/more-give-less-take1>.

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