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# Belonging, Identity, Time and Young People's Engagement in the Middle Years of School

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*Seth: For Soraya and Star*  
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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** Brown, Kelly and Phillips introduce a post-critical contribution to the ongoing, academic, community and policy discussions about young people's engagement and dis-engagement in the middle years of schooling. This introductory chapter discusses how this period of schooling—from the upper primary years through to the early-middle years of compulsory secondary schooling—is understood differently in different national contexts, in global frameworks such as the Incheon Declaration and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and in Melbourne (AUSTRALIA) where the research that informs this contribution was undertaken. Although it may be understood variously in these diverse contexts, there is an emerging, shared focus on this period of schooling as shaping young people's transitions through compulsory education to further/higher education and into work.

**Keywords** Middle years • Engagement • Dis-engagement • Transitions • Incheon Declaration • UN Sustainable Development Goals

### *MARANGUKA* ('CARING FOR OTHERS')

*Maranguka*, which...[means]...‘caring for others’ in Ngemba language, is a model of Indigenous self-governance which empowers community to coordinate the right mix and timing of services through an Aboriginal commu-

nity owned and led, multi-disciplinary team working in partnership with relevant government and non-government agencies.<sup>1</sup>

The remote, isolated New South Wales (AUSTRALIA) outback town of Bourke has a population of 2465. Bourke is so remote that there is a saying in Australia—*Out back of Bourke!*—which signifies that somewhere, someplace, is *really* remote and isolated. A place that would be *really* difficult to get to. If that is what you wanted to do. (*Why?*). Remoteness and isolation in the Australian context also usually signifies heat, desert or arid country, mining and or agricultural (pastoral) economic activity, and, often, a lack of the resources and opportunities that are more usually available in bigger country towns and cities. Remoteness and isolation often, then, also tends to signify a range of social, economic, cultural and political problems that accompany a relative lack of resources and opportunities. And, at the start of the twenty-first century, the historical legacy of more than 200 years as a colonial, settler society means that these social, economic, cultural and political problems that accompany a relative lack of resources and opportunities in remote, isolated communities in Australia are overwhelmingly visited upon and experienced by Aboriginal communities. And in these communities, young people tend to be over-represented in these problem spaces. As problems.

In Bourke, 30% of the current population (762 people) are from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background (the Australian Bureau of Statistics category for identifying and counting Australia's First Nations/Indigenous populations). The website for the Marunguka Just Reinvest project in Bourke notes that as a consequence of 'past government Aboriginal specific policies such as forced relocations and removals in the 1920s, today there are 21 different Tribal Groups living in Bourke' Just Reinvest NSW (2019). The median age of Bourke's Indigenous population is 25 years. More than one third of this population are children and young people aged up to 14 years old.

The Marunguka Justice Reinvestment project emerged from the ways in which various sections of the Bourke community were 'concerned about the number of Aboriginal families experiencing high levels of social disadvantage and rising crime'. The Marunguka project claims that: 'Over \$4 million each year is spent locking up children and young people in

<sup>1</sup> The information in this section draws largely from the account of Marunguka found here: <http://www.justreinvest.org.au/justice-reinvestment-in-bourke/>

Bourke'. And that 'Local community members have had enough'. This historical, and ongoing, legacy of colonialism, isolation, lack of resources and opportunities—made real in the health and well-being challenges faced by young Aboriginal people, their dis-engagement from, and often lack of participation in, compulsory and post compulsory education, and their entanglement in the juvenile justice systems—takes on a particular, though often repeated, character in places such as Bourke. According to Alistair Ferguson, the local manager of the Maranguka project:

*Kids were being taken away. Too many of my community were being locked up. Families were being shattered, again and again...And this was happening despite the huge amount of money government was channelling through a large number of service organisations in this town.*

*So we started talking together. We decided that a new way of thinking and doing things needed to be developed that helped our children. We decided it was time for our community to move beyond the existing service delivery model...a model which had clearly failed.*

*...so...together we could look at what's happening in our town and why Aboriginal disadvantage was not improving, and together we could build a new accountability framework which wouldn't let our kids slip through.*

Our interest at this point is with the approach, the methodology, that the local community adopted as they sought to productively engage the challenges that Aboriginal young people were facing in Bourke. The Maranguka project is framed by a methodology called the *collective impact approach*.

Collective impact is the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a complex social problem. The underlying premise of collective impact is that alone, no single individual or organisation can create large-scale, lasting social change. "Silver bullet" solutions to systemic social problems do not exist; they cannot be solved by simply scaling or replicating one organisation or program. Strong organisations are necessary but not sufficient for large-scale social change.<sup>2</sup>

This methodology, which is similar in a number of ways to the socio-ecological, action research approach that we will discuss at various points in what follows, meant that:

<sup>2</sup> Collective Impact Model: <http://www.justreinvest.org.au/collective-impact/>

The first stage of the justice reinvestment project has focused on building trust between community and service providers, identifying community priorities and circuit breakers, and data collection.

These sorts of approaches require developing, as we will discuss later, *surprising alliances*, and thinking *disruptively* about seemingly *wicked problems*.

Regular meetings have been held with Bourke community members and visiting and/or local representatives from most government departments. Government attendance and ongoing commitment towards exploring alternative means of service delivery during this time has gone a long way towards building a better relationship between community members and the government.

The local community has spent a lot of time thinking about how to reduce offending and make the community safer. They have identified and are in the process of implementing, in partnership with local service providers, a number of cross-sector initiatives or ‘circuit breakers’ to achieve this, including three justice circuit breakers addressing breaches of bail, outstanding warrants and the need for a learner driver program in Bourke.

Various data sources have been drawn on to identify problems, provide evidence of the outcomes from programs and interventions, and in relation to ‘issues’ that, at first glance, might not seem connected to a particular problem. This data includes information on such things as:

young person’s passage through the criminal justice system in Bourke and how the community is fairing [sic] in terms of offending, diversion, bail, sentencing and punishment, and re-offending rates. Data has also been collected on the community’s outcomes in early life, education, employment, housing, healthcare, child safety, and health outcomes including mental health and drugs and alcohol.

In an article in *The Guardian* in 2018 Lorena Allam (2018) wrote an account of the Maranguka project in which she provided some context for the ‘need’ for such a program—‘Bourke is one of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia, with high long-term unemployment and family violence, and the highest rate of juvenile convictions in NSW’. Allam spoke with some key people in the community about the challenges faced by Aboriginal young people in Bourke, and the opportunities that a

project such as this offered for disentangling some of the threads and trajectories that resulted in so many of the problems that confounded the communities in Bourke. Much of this account, and the account found on the Just Reinvest website point to the apparent success of this sort of disruption to ‘business as usual’. For example, Allam reports that between 2015 and 2017 the rates for various crimes in Bourke fell by:

1. 18% for major offences
2. 34% for non-domestic violence-related assaults
3. 39% for domestic violence-related assaults
4. 39% for drug offences
5. 35% for driving offences

In addition, rates of ‘reoffending also dropped significantly’. There was, as one example, ‘a 72% reduction in the number of people under 25 arrested for driving without a licence’. And, in ways that we want to return to later, it is often the *surprising alliances* that drive the most *disruptive* interventions into the socio-ecologies of a particular place-based problem, and the development of practices that show the most promise. Allam (2018) cited a ‘key initiative’ in the project that assisted ‘more than 200 mostly young people obtain a driving licence’. Police Inspector Andrew Hurst of Bourke police is quoted indicating that eight ‘off-duty police officers volunteered in the licensing program, “helping young learner drivers get their hours up”’.<sup>3</sup> Allam (2018) indicates that Inspector Hurst was reluctant to pinpoint the exact reasons for the drops in various categories of offences. However, he did recognise that ‘there had been a noticeable improvement over the past 12 months, as collaboration between the community and police has increased’.

“We’re working a lot more closely around youth engagement and family violence. The closer we work together the better,”...“The collaboration is geared to problem-solve rather than us using arrest as the only tool in the kit.”

The chair of Just Reinvest NSW is Sarah Hopkins. In a conversation with Allam (2018), Hopkins says that the place-based response to the

<sup>3</sup>In most Australian jurisdictions young people aged between 16 and 21 are required to undertake 120 hours of supervised driving training, recorded in a logbook, before they can obtain a probationary driving licence.

challenges and opportunities for young Aboriginal people in Bourke suggests a promising way forward for thinking about a number of related concerns:

“Over previous decades, we have seen the imprisonment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, women and children increasing dramatically”...“The experience in Bourke demonstrates that the solutions to this national crisis lie in community-led initiatives.

“We need to build communities, not prisons.”

### THE MIDDLE YEARS OF SCHOOLING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In this book we want to make a post-critical, sociologically informed contribution to the ongoing, significant, and challenging academic, community and policy discussions about young people’s engagement and dis-engagement in the middle years of schooling. This period of schooling—from the upper primary years through to the early-middle years of compulsory secondary schooling—is understood differently in different contexts in the OECD/EU economies, in the developing economies, and, increasingly, in global frameworks such the Incheon Declaration and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>4</sup> Although it may be understood in various ways in these diverse contexts, and, indeed, will be situated differently in the particular institutionalised schooling infrastructure in these disparate contexts, there is an increasing academic, policy and community focus on this period of schooling as being fundamentally implicated in the development of young people’s pathways and transitions through compulsory and post compulsory education, technical and further/higher education and into the worlds of work (see, for example: Bland et al. 2009; Boylan and Renzulli 2017; Owens 2018; Smyth and McInerney 2013).

We became aware of the Maranguka Just Reinvest project as we were finalising the report for a place-based research project that will be central to the stories we tell here about the ways in which *Belonging*, *Identity* and

<sup>4</sup>Incheon Declaration <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245656>

UN SDGs <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> and SDG 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4>

*Time* shape young people's engagement in the middle years of schooling. We were, and continue to be, interested in the ways in which local communities were looking for opportunities to deal with and respond to the local manifestations of profound, seemingly intractable problems that have beginnings, happenings, causes and consequences which extend far beyond the apparent boundaries and borders (geographical, administrative, juridical) of particular places. What is also significant, challenging and powerful in these Maranguka stories is that they compel us to think about what 'caring for others' might mean beyond a place such as Bourke. A place where first nations' people are working to re-imagine what caring for others might mean when all around them social, cultural, economic and political systems, processes and practices demonstrate, too often and with damaging consequences, a distinct lack of care for their communities.

Our approach takes into account a recognition by some researchers of a need to look beyond a deficit approach to explaining and addressing school dis-engagement. To move beyond seeing dis-engagement as a result of poverty, a lack of parental interest and involvement, a lack of academic ability and so on (Smyth and McInerney 2013).

We have examined student's 'engagement' and 'dis-engagement' in the context of a multiplicity of factors that affect young people's lived experience of 'being in school'. We describe this approach as socio-ecological, because it draws on a range of sociological and ecological models and methods reported in the educational research literature that have provided support for the actors involved in educational settings—young people, parents, teachers, school staff, community support services—to imagine and co-create new ways of interacting with each other so that they might facilitate successful educational outcomes and career trajectories. For example, Nicholson and Putwain (2015, 1) highlight several dimensions of the construct of 'student engagement'—including cognitive, affective and behavioural elements—to suggest that: 'Engagement is malleable and responsive to contextual factors—a student's family and school circumstances'. They specifically 'investigated the school-related factors that facilitate re-engagement in learning from the perspective of initially disengaged students' (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 1).

What is of interest here is that, while they do not theorise their approach as socio-ecological, Nicholson and Putwain examined the influences affecting re-engagement of students in school education in terms of sun-dry factors associated with the ecology of school experience within an alternate provision (AP) school. Factors that disengaged students saw as

facilitating their re-engagement were analysed by Nicholson and Putwain under four thematic areas: classroom, relational, generic school and personal factors. (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 1) And the significance of these can be appreciated, at least in part, when seen in relation to their ‘maranguka’ dimension—or how they help to foster practices of caring for others.

Classroom factors concern the space in which learning and engagement is experienced. The researchers suggest, for example, that the size of the class can be a critical factor:

Students believed that small class size led to greater concentration in lessons due to staff being better able to monitor and control behavioural problems. They emphasised the importance of the low student-staff ratio (typically two-three members of staff to five-six students) in ensuring that help was readily available and in receiving sufficient one-to-one support. (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 4–5)

Other classroom factors included the tenor of pedagogical relationships. Staff in the alternative provision (AP) school were perceived as more approachable than staff in mainstream schools, and students were given more autonomy to choose topics they would write on (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 4–5). The level of stimulus was also important. Students indicated that an appropriate intellectual challenge made learning enjoyable. The tone of the learning environment was a further classroom factor the researchers noted. In the AP school, lessons were relaxed, fun and interactive. Finally, the ways in which students interacted with one another was supportive of positive engagement. In the AP setting positive peer learning and support were encouraged (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 4–5).

Relational factors, according to Nicholson and Putwain, are those positive staff-student relationships that students experienced in the AP school they investigated. They identified the following four dimensions of relationships as being important in shaping engagement:

- Staff showed respect to students (who showed respect back)
- Staff got to know students personally
- Staff understood that home problems often affected students at school and sought to help address those problems
- Staff encouraged students to believe they could achieve success. (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 5)

Generic school factors include a range of characteristics in the school ecology that distinguished the AP school structure from that of mainstream schools. Nicholson and Putwain (2015, 6) identified how, for example, students reported having more freedom to leave and return to school during the day (for instance, at break time). A further element concerned greater flexibility regarding the way the school day operated. They noted how the structure of the school day suited previously disengaged students better than that of mainstream school(s) they had experienced previously. Another component related to the physical and material fabric of the school itself. That is, students evidently were satisfied with school resources and facilities. Also, in the AP setting, students felt supported to explore wider options beyond the school in the wider society and economy. They participated in school excursions more than they had in other schools, and they received support from teachers in relation to their future employability.

Finally, Nicholson and Putwain (2015) identified several personal factors which the AP setting fostered that influenced re-engagement of previously disengaged students. Here Nicholson and Putwain observed how experiences in the AP school helped previously disengaged students understand the value of education, become determined learners, and to focus on achieving academically. They suggest that some students were investing time on study outside school hours. In addition, the AP school helped them to improve psychologically: they felt more mature, more relaxed, less angry, and their self-confidence had increased. And there was an overall shift in their intellectual and personal engagement with the school experience:

students said that they applied more time and cognitive effort into understanding their schoolwork, and that since starting at the school, their attendance, behaviour and academic achievement had all improved. (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 7)

In effect, without saying as much, Nicholson and Putwain's research (2015) points to the productive possibilities of a socio-ecological perspective inasmuch as it highlights the importance of seeing the issues in a school-based and place-based relational context. As they argue:

There was evidence of affective (e.g., students reported that they enjoyed school and had positive relationships with staff and peers), cognitive (e.g.,