CHAPTER 1

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.¹

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 Maranguka 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 Maranguka 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 Maranguka project claims that: ‘Over $4 million each year is spent locking up children and young people in

¹The 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.\(^2\)

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:

\(^2\) Collective Impact Model: [http://www.justreinvest.org.au/collective-impact/](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”’. 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

3 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. 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

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4 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 sundry 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 ‘marangukka’ 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.,
they invested time and effort into learning) and behavioural (e.g., their school attendance and behavioural conduct had greatly improved since they joined the school) engagement in these initially disengaged students. Considering that these students were disconnected with education on entry to the AP school, often with extremely poor rates of attendance at their previous school(s), these are important findings and strongly suggest that the school-related contextual factors identified here have had a major part to play in their re-engagement with education. (Nicholson and Putwain 2015, 7, emphasis added)

Other researchers have emphasised the importance of a ‘socio-spatial approach’ (Smyth and McInerney 2013). Smyth and McInerney (2013, 39), to illustrate, suggest that:

Young people who disengage or disconnect from school are often demonised within the media and the wider public imagination, from a largely individualized and pathological positioning. Policy explanations and responses are often unhelpful in their focus on a range of ‘deficit’ attributes—poverty, poor parenting, dysfunctional families, low familial achievement, aspiration and motivation, and other ‘at risk’ categories.

Smyth and McInerney (2013, 39) argue for: ‘a different explanatory framework that foregrounds the experiences of some young people who had disengaged from school and resumed learning under a very different set of conditions to the ones that had exiled them from schools in the first place.’ Their socio-spatial framework allows them to explore ‘the notion of “relational space” as it was appropriated and reclaimed by these young people, in explaining how they saw themselves as constructing viable and sustainable learning identities for themselves’.

Other researchers have emphasised an ‘ecological approach’ to understanding the interplay of the school system and classroom elements in affecting young people’s engagement and dis-engagement with school. Emilie Phillips Smith et al. (1997) and her colleagues described a study in which they used an ecological model to investigate parent involvement in a medium-size, urban, southeastern school district. They noted that research had been undertaken of the ways in which home, school and community partnerships operate. However, while others had investigated factors influencing parent involvement, Phillips Smith et al. (1997, 339) suggested that ‘little research has examined the combined impact of family, teacher, school, and community factors’. In their work in a
medium-size, urban, southeastern school district in the US, they suggest that parent background and attitudes, teacher practices, school and neighborhood climate all provide ecological contexts under which involvement can be encouraged (Phillips Smith et al. 1997, 339).

More recently, Doll et al. (2012, 44) have reported on the use of ‘an ecological framework for school mental health services that differs in important ways from existing service delivery models’. They argue that ‘integration of the ecological model into existing strategies for school mental health services can strengthen the contributions of school psychologists to routines and practices that support students’ success in school’.

A Bourdeusian approach has also been used by some researchers to analyse the ‘social capital’ factors affecting school dis-engagement and dropout within a socio-ecological perspective. Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2017), for instance, highlight structural factors associated with the ‘habitus’ of the school which can, and do, frustrate the development of positive and supportive relationships between students and teachers in school. Their study is based on a series of 60 semi-structured interviews with teachers from Austrian secondary schools. From this perspective they claim that ‘many teachers attribute school dis-engagement and dropout to personal and family factors, whereas the causes of school dropout which are linked to the school structure, attitudes and behaviour remain unspoken or marginalised’. They conclude:

The findings illustrate that the interplay between a defensive traditional teaching habitus, a field of traditional teaching and the mainstream doxa legitimises a logic of teaching practice which ignores the importance of social capital to counteract the process of dropping out. It is concluded that traditional habitus–field relations inhibit the building of social capital and relationships in school, which both are crucial resources to tackle school dropout. (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2017, 121)

Recent survey-based research has examined the range of factors in Australia that contribute to up to 25% of middle years young people experiencing low levels of well-being and marginalisation. The Australian Child Wellbeing Project (AWCP 2016), for example, has outlined several evidence-based arguments advanced about how and why this occurs:

- Low wellbeing is concentrated in groups of young people who are recognised as marginalised—young people with disability, young
carers, materially disadvantaged young people, culturally and linguistically diverse young people, Indigenous young people, young people in rural and remote Australia and young people in out of home care.

- Different forms of low well-being are linked—outcomes in one domain are often associated with outcomes in other domains. For example, high pressure from schoolwork, reported by 15% of boys and 23% of girls in Year 8, is related to high levels of health complaints, seen by experts as an indicator of stress.

- Almost one young person in five (19%) reported going hungry to school or to bed. These young people are more likely to miss school frequently.

- Both young people who go hungry and the one in ten who miss school frequently are likely to experience high levels of health complaints, frequent bullying, and low levels of engagement at school.

- Young people who are in a marginalised group are more likely than others to go hungry, miss school, and experience its identified correlates of health complaints, bullying and low engagement at school.

- Family and social networks provide support to young people. Young people with smaller support networks have lower average levels of wellbeing than those with larger networks. (Redmond et al. 2016, 1–2)

The authors suggest that the policy implications are clear. Marginalised young people who are hungry, disengaged from school and stressed by schoolwork are likely to miss opportunities for healthy development and strengthening of their skills for productive employment and citizenship in their adult life. Consequently, they call on governments to ‘develop joined up approaches that reach across policy silos’ and to ‘develop policies that are sensitive to the needs of young people who are marginalised, and the role that family and social networks can play in supporting them’ (Redmond et al. 2016, 1–2).

This is consistent with an earlier report (Grogan et al. 2013) on how to strengthen the support system for young people in Victoria (Australia), which emphasised the value of integrating family support, early years, middle years and youth programs to facilitate effective transitions and secure positive outcomes within and across each life phase. The five key areas of focus it noted are:
1. Support across the life course: adolescence is starting earlier and finishing later. This shift demands a rethink about how we respond to children, young people and young adults.

2. Early intervention at every age and stage: a diverse mix of services can provide support to young people at every age and at every stage of an issue, from prevention and early invention to more specialist supports through to crisis support and beyond.

3. Services working collaboratively: youth services must remain at the heart of the service system for young people, but an integrated response also requires the expertise of other services such as family support, adult support services and schools.

4. Accessible and inclusive services: support needs to be accessible, available when and where young people need it and inclusive of a diverse range of young people.

5. Supporting improved outcomes: services and supports need to be built on sound evidence and respond to identified need within communities.

Our review of the scholarship on young people’s engagement in the middle years is not meant to be exhaustive, is not, even, meant to be illustrative. Such work is beyond the scope of this book. Our brief sketch is meant to map the spaces in which we will situate what follows, and to outline some of the limits and possibilities of these spaces.

**THE WHITTLESEA YOUTH COMMITMENT AND SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODELS OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S WELL-BEING, RESILIENCE AND ENTERPRISE: A PILOT INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE YOUNG PEOPLE’S ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE YEARS**

The start of the twenty-first century presents many challenges, and provides many opportunities for individual young people, their families, and the communities, towns and cities that they grow up in. The unfolding ‘digital disruption’—driven by the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, the Internet of Things (IoT), AI technologies and rapidly advancing bio-genetic technologies—promises to profoundly transform traditional understandings of education, training, employment and the trajectories of our life course. Some argue that the so-called ‘gig economy’ is already contributing to the growth
of a global ‘precariat’ class, millions of whom are young people (FYA 2015; Kelly 2017; Productivity Commission 2016; Rifkin 2015; Standing 2011). These challenges are compounded by the echoing effects of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008; the expectation that young people provide enterprising solutions to their own economic insecurity; and by the ‘moral economies of neo-liberalism and austerity’ that are shaped by debates about the choices made by individuals, groups, communities and organisations in relation to what is ‘good’ for young people (Kelly and Pike 2017). There are also growing environmental threats such as the effects of climate change, including, in Australia, bushfires and floods. And, at the time of finalising the draft of this book, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to pose new and compounding social and economic challenges that are transforming the choices and options of young people, families and communities, both locally and globally. Including, at the most fundamental level, the very possibility of attending school.

These emerging and established challenges impact different populations of young people in different ways. The capable, the successful, the included, mainstream of young people are imagined as being able to respond to these challenges and opportunities through their capacities for innovation and enterprise. They are imagined as being equipped with a set of skills, capabilities, behaviours and dispositions that enable them to thrive in contexts of uncertainty, precarity, turbulence and disruption. They are resilient and enterprising (Kelly 2013). In the foreword to a 2015 report from the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) titled The New Work Order, FYA’s CEO Jan Owen (2015, 2) suggested that:

At FYA we see a significant opportunity to sure [sic] up our nation’s future by investing in the next generation and backing them to create the kind of world they want to live in. Core to this will be a generations [sic] of enterprising young people who are job builders and creators, not only job seekers.

That’s why FYA is calling for a national enterprise skills strategy to ensure young people are prepared for the economy of the future and equipped with the tools to drive economic and social progress. We want all young Australians to learn the skills to be digitally-literate, financially-savvy, innovative and adaptable and help them navigate complex careers of the future.

At the same time, more marginalised populations of young people—for example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugee/migrant communities and young people from poorer households and communities—are more likely to disengage from education and training, experience
unemployment or precarious employment at rates far higher than their peers and older workers, and experience a range of issues that impact on the state of their social, physical and mental health and well-being (Kelly 2018; Kelly and Kamp 2015; Kelly and Pike 2017). Marginalisation suggests a lack of well-being, resilience and enterprise (Kelly et al. 2019).

It is against this general background, and the more specific details that emerge from detailed research, that we, and fellow RMIT University researchers from the School of Education have developed a program of research, comprising multiple research projects, that is titled Young People, Well-being, Resilience and Enterprise: Critical Perspectives for the Anthropocene. In collaboration with a range of stakeholders, this program of research aims to investigate and co-design innovative responses to these challenges that shift attention from an individual young person’s well-being, resilience and enterprise, to the ‘ecologies’ that can promote inclusion, social justice and democracy. At a time when ‘solutions’ to these challenges and opportunities are often reduced to a set of technical inputs to what are imagined as ‘technical’, ‘engineering’ (social, mechanical, environmental) problems.

With the support of a small grant from the Collier Charitable Fund, and together with key stakeholders from the Hume-Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network (HWLLEN), and the Whittlesea Youth Commitment Committee (WYC CoM), we conducted a pilot research project in which we developed a conceptual model, and a model for collaborative practice, framed by a sense of the need to identify and explore innovative and disruptive socio-ecological understandings of young people’s well-being, resilience and enterprise, and the ways in which these shaped young people’s engagement in the middle years of schooling.

HWLLEN is a not-for-profit, membership–based organisation located in the outer northern suburbs in Melbourne (Australia). HWLLEN, along with the other members of a state wide LLEN, is partly funded by the Victorian State Government and aims to improve transition outcomes and

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5 See our project webpage https://youngpeopleanthropocene.org.

The Guardian newspaper reports that the word Anthropocene, ‘from the Ancient Greek word anthropos, meaning “human”, acknowledges that humans are the major cause’ of the forces—‘extreme weather, submerged cities, acute resource shortages, vanished species, lakes turned to deserts, nuclear fallout’—currently transforming the planet. See, also, Resilience Thinking for the Anthropocene.

6 https://www.colliercharitable.org/
to help young people complete Year 12 (or equivalent).\textsuperscript{7} WYC CoM is a community-based intervention strategy designed to improve young people’s transitions and education, training and employment opportunities. It was founded in 1998 from a process based on a Spirit of Cooperation Agreement between the partners in the Whittlesea community (including the City of Whittlesea, community support agencies and employer representatives, employment services, and stakeholders involved in secondary and tertiary education).\textsuperscript{8}

The HWLLEN and the WYC CoM are, in this sense, part of a place-based response in the City of Whittlesea to issues of relative disadvantage associated with Melbourne’s Northern suburbs. These suburbs have a fast-growing youth population—many from migrant/refugee backgrounds—and high levels of youth unemployment. The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Disadvantage ranks the City of Whittlesea (CoW) as the eighth most disadvantaged area in Victoria. The City of Whittlesea (CoW) Youth Plan 2030 projects a population of 40,000 young people in the city by 2021, with a high percentage from a Non-English Speaking Background. A total of 40,000+ young people currently live in the City of Hume. In a number of ways, young people in the City of Whittlesea are living in a situation of relative disadvantage compared with the experience of young people across Greater Melbourne. Their situation is revealed most starkly in relation to differing experiences of education and employment pathways:

- There are more young people (aged 15 to 24 years) in the City of Whittlesea who are disengaged from both education and employment compared with Greater Melbourne (9.8% and 7.5%, respectively).

Consequently, the outcomes from school education in the City of Whittlesea are worse for young people than in other parts of Melbourne:

\textsuperscript{7} Details of the Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network are available at https://www.hwllen.com.au

\textsuperscript{8} Details of the WYC are available at http://dusseldorp.org.au/resource/whittlesea-youth-commitment-resources—accessed October 2018
• There are more residents from the City of Whittlesea with no post-school qualification compared with Greater Melbourne (46.0% and 38.6%, respectively).

For those young people in the City of Whittlesea who contemplate post-school qualifications, fewer transition into university than across Greater Melbourne, while more complete vocational qualifications than elsewhere in Melbourne:

• There are fewer residents from the City of Whittlesea attending university compared with Greater Melbourne (4.8% and 6.4%, respectively).
• There are proportionally more residents with a vocational qualification in the City of Whittlesea compared with Greater Melbourne (18.1% and 15.3%, respectively).9

Children in their middle years in the City of Whittlesea (between 9 and 14 years of age) are also vulnerable to disadvantage compared with children of comparable age across Greater Melbourne. The City of Whittlesea has examined middle years issues by collecting data using a Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) over several years. Data from the latest MDI survey in 2016 revealed that students in their middle years, experience a declining sense of belonging at schools—68% of Grade 4 students felt connected and valued at their school reporting a high level of school belonging, but only 41% of Year 7 students felt connected in the same way (City of Whittlesea 2018, 23).

Similar trends of declining outcomes for middle years children in the City of Whittlesea are apparent as regards their self-esteem, school-day nutrition and engagement in after-school activities:

• A child’s perception of self-worth was relatively high, but declined as the child got older:
  – 80% of Grade 4 students and 65% of Year 7 students reported a high level of self-esteem;

9 This data is drawn from City of Whittlesea (2018) Place Profiles Demographic Profiles of Precinct Areas in the City of Whittlesea.
– 65% of Grade 4 students and 44% of Year 7 students had a high level of happiness with their lives; and,
– 66% of Grade 4 students and 48% of Year 7 students reported a high level of optimism and having positive expectations for their future.

• The proportion of children who eat breakfast regularly (five or more times per week) also declined as the child ages (81% of Grade 4 students and 61% of Year 7 students).
• The majority of children surveyed participated in an organised after-school activity at least once a week; however the proportion of children participating declined as the child reached high school (82% of Grade 4 students and 67% of Year 7 students) (City of Whittlesea 2018, 24).

These data reveal a story of relative disadvantage which, if left unaddressed, would mean worsening outcomes for young people and the community of the City of Whittlesea. The pilot project that we report on at different times in what follows developed from a number of concerns about the growing problems and challenges of school non-attendance in Whittlesea, and the array of agencies with some interest in this concern:

• the Department of Education and Training that is focused on issues of youth mental health, school retention and transition;
• the Brotherhood of St. Laurence’s, whose Reconnect program caters for young people aged 15–24 years who are early school leavers and are not currently participating in education, training or employment;
• Invigor8ing Education (a partnership with Whittlesea City Council, WYC and the YMCA);
• the YMCA, whose Engage program aims to empower and train young people in understanding and assisting peers experiencing mental health distress;
• Kildonan Uniting Care’s School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) that provide support for young people at risk of leaving school;
• Melbourne Polytechnic, which aims to engage people in education as a pathway to employment; and
• the Victoria Police, with their focus on high risk young people, employing two new Youth Specialists to work across four local government areas in the northern Melbourne metropolitan region.
Our project was linked to the strategic directions identified in the *Middle Years in Whittlesea: A Collective Response*, and was aimed at addressing specific actions set out in the Whittlesea Middle Years Implementation Plan (Whittlesea Youth Commitment, Hume Whittlesea Local Learning and Employment Network, City of Whittlesea (2017). HWLLEN, WYC CoM and the City of Whittlesea developed the Whittlesea Middle Years Strategy to support young people aged 9 to 14 during a time of significant transition, risk and opportunity. *A Collective Response* was built on consultation and survey data, especially implementation of the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI). The *Implementation Plan* for the *Collective Response* strategy outlined a structured approach for supporting the rollout of the strategy, including the conduct of Action Research (AR) projects such as the one that we will discuss here.

This pilot project involved a structured, collaborative process of action research and co-design of interventions to promote engagement of young people in middle years schooling and to reduce non-attendance by a cohort of students identified in school satisfaction surveys and other research instruments (notably the MDI) as constituting up to 30% of students in the middle years across Whittlesea. In brief, a series of four AR workshops involving, at different times, eight to ten participants from the HWLLEN and WYC networks revealed three primary, intersecting themes concerning the engagement of young people in middle years schooling: *Belonging, Identity* and *Time*. These were reflected in discussions during the remaining Workshops, as participants:

- articulated a number of possible interventions,
- mapped the range of stakeholders who could be involved in co-designing and implementing them,
- formulated the intervention ideas into a set of Logic Models to guide implementation of the activities in a strategic way and to provide the basis for an evaluation framework so the processes and impacts associated with the interventions could be monitored and assessed.

**Participants**

Our action research process was embodied by a particular group of stakeholders in a particular place. So that our readers might have a sense of those actual people, their organisational affiliations and roles, and their focal concerns, we will begin by taking you into the room where we
usually met and introducing the participants to you. (Consistent with human research ethics, and in the interest of preserving anonymity, the names of all participants have been changed. Where participants work at schools, the names of the schools have also been changed, and are referred to simply as School A, School B and so on).

Ashley is a leader in the HWLLEN. The purpose of the HWLLEN is to improve outcomes for young people (ages 10–25) by increasing their opportunities to participate, achieve and successfully transition in education, training or employment. The HWLLEN provides local knowledge and capacity to address education and training needs with a particular focus on young people at risk of disengaging or who have disengaged from education and training and who are unemployed or not in full time employment.

Beth is a Case Manager at Melbourne Polytechnic. Her background is in social science and sociology with a Master of Science in Criminology. She mostly works with young people who are disengaged from education and training, are homeless, and/or are dealing with drug and alcohol issues, behavioural issues, or criminal backgrounds.

Cathy is a registered division one nurse with the Secondary School Nurse Program from the Victorian (State Government) Department of Education and Training. The program is placed in secondary settings to support the well-being of young people. Cathy works full time and is placed in two schools.

Deb is the Leading Teacher at a secondary school (School A) in Whittlesea that is seen locally as a ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ 7 to 12 secondary school. She has experience working with Year 11 and 12 students, and is focused on working with them to support school engagement, and learning and training pathways, in ways that take account of students’ home lives and backgrounds.

Ellen is the Principal of School A. As well, she is the Chairperson of the Whittlesea Youth Commitment. She has worked for 40 years in schools, and with culturally diverse schools and communities in Melbourne’s inner and outer northern suburbs.

Alan works in a community engagement role with the YMCA at Whittlesea. He directs a youth services team that runs programs for young people at the YMCA and in local schools.
Brock is a Team Leader of Youth Services at the Whittlesea Council (Local Government). Youth Services runs a range of different programs, activities and events for young people across the municipality. Fran is the Principal of School B in Whittlesea. Her school enrolls students from the northern suburbs. Most of its 220 students have behavioural difficulties and social/emotional development issues and have fallen through the gaps in the ‘mainstream’ schooling system. Ginger has been working for over three years as a Senior Wellbeing and Engagement Officer at the Victorian (State Government) Department of Education and Training (DET). Before taking on the role in the DET, she was the School Focused Youth Service Coordinator in the northern suburbs and has also worked in Local Government, Community Services and in government schools. Chris is the Manager of Youth Pathways and Transitions, with the Victorian (State Government) Department of Education and Training (DET). Chris has a Master of Science in Social Science and has worked in various roles in Victoria, including as the Director of Community and Social Innovation in the Victorian (State Government) Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources. Dale is an Inspector with the Victoria Police. He is a second-generation police officer who has worked in Victoria Police for over 20 years. Over that time, he has worked in different roles such as operations review and support, and on the ‘frontline’. He recently became an inspector in the Whittlesea area where he works on tackling the problem of family violence. Heather is a School-Focused Youth Services Coordinator working in Whittlesea with Uniting Kildonan—a not-for-profit ‘faith-based’ organisation. Heather has experience in education and wellness and as a youth specialist. In her role as a School Focused Youth Service Coordinator at Whittlesea, Uniting Kildonan, she works with primary and secondary schools in Whittlesea to assist students at risk of disengaging from education.

Our introductions here are designed to provide a more ‘personal’ understanding of the human and professional interests that were brought together in a project aimed at imagining new ways to create a culture of ‘caring for others’ in Whittlesea’s schools.
Stories of Identity, Belonging and Time

Our ‘disruptive’ contribution to policy, community and academic debates relates to the ways in which we will explore—through a ‘post’ (structural, human, critical) framework—how concepts, ideas and experiences of Identity, Belonging and Time are ‘entangled’ in complex and diverse ways in shaping the ways in which young people engage, or not, with the middle years of schooling. And, importantly, by suggesting that these ‘entanglements’ need to be understood ‘socio-ecologically’ rather than individually. That is, we will suggest that these debates need to move beyond a focus on why individual young people engage with the middle years, or not, to a focus on the socio-ecologies of particular places, and the ways that these ecologies shape the opportunities, supports, responses to, and possibilities of, young people engaging productively in the middle years as part of their educational and work biographies.

In Chap. 2 we argue that identity, a sense of self, is important in shaping young people’s engagement in the middle years of schooling. Drawing on posthuman and feminist theories, we suggest that identity is relational, embodied and situated (Wexler 1992). Referencing research conducted in Melbourne we illustrate how Place, Families and Institutions are entangled in forming young people’s identities and engagement. The analysis is framed by: the ways in which globalisation processes produce ‘wild and tame zones’; Foucault’s theories of governmentalities to illuminate the need for young people to develop ‘enterprising’ forms of personhood (Dean 2010; Foucault 1995; Rose 1998, 1999); and how various posthumanist understandings of human subjects—including Braidotti’s (2013) concept of ‘nomad’ selfhood—provide new frameworks for understanding young people’s identities.

Chapter 3 engages with the extensive research literature on young people and belonging—in schools, in communities, as members of an ethnic or religious group, as part of a collective somewhere, doing something. We draw on research undertaken in Melbourne, to discuss the ways in which school culture, school networks and ideas about resilience intersect in complex ways to shape young people’s belonging. The chapter explores ‘the trouble’ with the emergence of the concept of belonging as a means to understand and explain young people’s engagement in the middle years of schooling, and the related movement in policy and educational discourses from thinking about young people at-risk, to thinking about and being concerned with young people’s resilience.
In Chap. 4, we examine schooling as a time-based institutional process. This chapter examines young people’s experiences of, and enactments of time in relation to young people’s engagement in the middle years in Melbourne, through concerns about timetables, networked time and sleep time. Our analysis of time in its disciplinary, institutional and metaphorical forms, and how these forms shape young people’s engagement with the middle years of school, references: Foucault’s examination of the disciplinary possibilities of clock time in the ways that schools order time and space; Giddens’ work on time and the colonisation of young people’s futures; and the material and embodied challenges that emerge from Hochschild’s powerful metaphors of ‘quality time’ in a ‘24/7’ world.

Finally, in Chap. 5, we each contribute closing remarks about future options for thinking about young people’s engagement in the middle years. Scott explores the value of socio-ecological models and integrated life-course service frameworks. He suggests ‘maranguka’ offers a model for ‘caring for others’ and of collaboration between services to improve young people’s engagement. Seth engages with the concepts of the ‘pre-cariat’, ‘nomad self’, ‘affirmative ethics’, ‘endurance’, and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, to frame support for young people as they work towards affirmation in the middle years. Peter canvasses the posthuman literatures on ‘complexities’, ‘entanglements’ and ‘convergences’. He suggests that a ‘posthuman ethics’ provides a framework for disruptive thinking to remake education processes for the trouble we find ourselves in.

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