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ABSTRACT
Universal access to elementary schooling is a goal that was largely achieved in western democracies by the mid twentieth century. Yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, students’ access to schooling appears to be back on the agenda; this time, students themselves rather than our social systems are regulating their access to school. Increasingly, schools throughout Australia and in several other OECD countries are recording a worrying decline in student attendance in the compulsory years, prompting a certain amount of societal ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’ and ‘moral panic’. This paper reviews the literature on student attendance and absenteeism as a feature of contemporary schooling. It begins with an account of how this literature variously defines absenteeism – its discursive categories – and where it locates the ‘problem’. The ‘solutions’ that flow from these accounts are also explicated, specifically in relation to their regulatory effects on students and on the education they are offered. The paper’s critical reading of these problems of and solutions for student absenteeism seeks to highlight the institutional authoring of such student behaviour and of students as ‘other’. It also uncovers the silences in the literature, particularly in relation to cultural difference, student subjectivity and teacher pedagogy – what teachers are doing (and not doing) to/with students. The paper concludes that issues of low socio-economic status do not feature very loudly in the literature (and, we suspect, in practice), despite being strongly associated with students who respond to the demands and relevance of schooling by ‘talking with their feet’.
INTRODUCTION
This paper provides a review of the literature on student absenteeism, particularly in relation to the compulsory years of Australian schooling. It argues that much of this literature is overly focused on absent students to the exclusion of a consideration of social institutions (such as schools) and their actors; a refocusing that we think has the potential to provide more cogent explanation of why some students are choosing not to attend school in contemporary times. In reviewing the literature, then, we demonstrate how dominant discourses in the literature ‘demonise’ students and, by extension, ‘valorise’ schools and teachers, particularly their well-intentioned (but sometimes ill-informed) efforts to remediate wayward students. The paper also highlights the futility in these accounts of student absenteeism that render teachers and schools impotent in addressing the ‘problem’ unless students (and their parents) are willing to subject themselves to remediation and rejoin mainstream forms of school engagement.

We begin our critical review by historically locating student absenteeism within the compulsory schooling movement of the 19th century and its attendant legislation. We then explore the character of the literature, noting some variation but on the whole being overwhelmed by the volume (by its quantity and force) of the depiction of students as deviant. Following this ‘name-calling’, we introduce understandings of students as embodied, situated and different, again identifying the literature’s failure (in general) to come to terms with these realities. The effects of interpreting student absenteeism as a problem invested in students themselves is then explored, providing an outline and critique of what teachers and schools do to address this apparent problem. Finally, we argue the absences, disregard and arrogance of the literature generally and how we might respond to these challenges.

COMPULSORY SCHOOLING
There is a tendency in the literature and in much popular conversation to locate problems of student absenteeism within students themselves and/or their families (see below). However, its origins are more cogently and broadly understood as informed by the introduction of compulsory schooling. That is, student absenteeism is primarily an issue in the context of students’ failure to comply with compulsory attendance requirements. Before the introduction of such legislation legally compelling students’ attendance at school, student absenteeism was not seen as problematic; certainly not by ‘old humanists’ (Williams, 1961), advocates of a liberal and elitist education, who dominated the education agenda and certainly not by policy and legislation regulating the largely church-based schools of mid-nineteenth-century Australia. However, considerable public pressure in Australia, and Victoria more particularly, during the mid-nineteenth century put public and compulsory schooling on the agenda.

Elsewhere, Raymond Williams (1961) suggests that the introduction of compulsory public schooling in Britain represented a victory for ‘industrial trainers’ (advocates of a vocational education) made possible through the support of the ‘public educators’ (those who sought a democratic curriculum) over an ‘old humanist’ advocacy for a liberal education. More generally, within the UK, Australia and the USA:
The introduction of mass schooling … arose in the broader context of a struggle for social improvement and transformation, to provide opportunities for the ‘poorer classes’. This is not to deny that the introduction of mass schooling was also motivated by a number of other purposes, including the need to supply a more educated workforce for the newly mechanised industries and the desire of the authorities to contain social disorder among the propertyless masses. … They [social reformers] thus viewed the expansion of school systems under compulsory education laws as a great achievement because such laws reflected an overriding concern for social justice. With mass schooling, so it was thought, everyone was given an opportunity for social improvement, and for access to power and privilege which only a few in society had hitherto enjoyed. (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, Henry, 1997, p. 126)

In Victoria, Australia, mass or compulsory schooling was introduced through legislation

The Education Act 1872 [of Victoria, Australia] came into being in obedience to the desire of the majority of the electors of Victoria that every child in the colony should be given the rudiments of an English education [the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic]. In order to effect this, it contained three main provisions … It made education secular, compulsory, and free. (in Sweetman, Long & Smyth, 1922, p. 65)

A revised Education Act 1876 and Part VIII of the Neglected Children’s Act 1887 completed the early framework of legislation for compulsory and free education in Victoria. ‘Subsequent legislation … particularly the Education Act of 1958 and the Community Welfare Services Act of 1970, strengthened compulsory education law which obligates students to attend school [initially to the age of 14 years, later increased to 15 years] and accept a range of schooling experiences purported to provide the necessary tools for their future adulthood’ (Coventry, 1988, p. 82). In these initially ‘elementary’ but later ‘comprehensive’ schools, English constituted the core curriculum and grammar the primary regulating influence over mind and body, not simply language.

In brief, the promises of schooling were two fold. Schooling society’s children in the moral and work ethics of industry would provide it with a source of skilled labour. Moreover, such preparation, it was said, would enable these students to gain access to a better life; with a job, for example. However, these promises have not stood the test of time. Indeed, we believe that it is because they now ring hollow for growing numbers of students that absenteeism has become such an issue. That is, (1) schooling in contemporary Australia does not live up to its promises: to provide students with the possibility and opportunity of a better future (not withstanding the paternalism of this offer, given it is often a future constructed for students not by them). The casualisation of work, the rise of part-time work, particularly for low skilled workers, periods of work intermitted by unemployment and so on, now characterises areas in which student absenteeism is also an issue. (2) Further, the interests of industry have changed. Its interest is not simply to produce appropriate workers. Industry now sees profits in reducing its workforce. For example, the current economic recover in the US is being touted as a ‘jobless recovery’. It is in this context that students and their parents understand schooling and which informs their responses to it. For some, this may involve periods of absence from school particularly for those not convinced of the value of schooling above a range of other possible experiences. While this is not a response that western democracies (or industry) can afford, it often seems as if it is much easier to demonise students than to confront the social, economic and political difficulties of our times. And there is considerable support for such an approach in the academic literature.
NAMING STUDENTAILMENTS

‘Delinquent’, ‘truant’, ‘deviant’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘transient’, ‘school phobic’, ‘school avoider/refuser’ are some of the labels used to describe student absenteeism in western societies. Absent students are variously categorised as ‘at risk’, dangerous, disruptive, dysfunctional, alienated, disengaged, isolated, disaffected and resisters. Such negative terminology positions students who absent themselves from school as anti-social. From this perspective, the school plays a pivotal role in providing the understandings, skills and values that young people need to participate effectively in adult life. Absence from school therefore dooms students to social failure. And, as Collins et al (2000:7-8) have noted, failure to complete school results in reduced capacity for continuous learning and employment, particularly for boys. Girls are also less likely to gain full time employment, thus reducing their opportunities to develop their ‘full human, social and cultural capital’.

Rather than looking at the individual and trying to ascertain the root cause of the absentee’s problem, much of the research approaches taken by various institutional stakeholders have focused on what Wardhaugh (1990:736) refers to as the ‘deviant social and personality background of the non-attendees’ or on the perceived negative impact of truancy on society – crime, drugs, violence (see for example, Kierkus & Baer, 2002). Coventry (1988:81) notes ‘that such views constitute an implausible “blaming the victim” argument which serves to reinforce standard school responses. Individual students are seen to be the problem and, therefore, their treatment or control is considered both appropriate and necessary.’ In addition to blaming the student, the literature frequently extends blame to include the absentee student’s family, referring to the family as dysfunctional, of low socio-economic status, with low parental achievement, and ‘families with problems of domestic violence, child abuse, substance abuse and mental illness’ (Wardhaugh 1990; Dwyer 1996).

However, the terminology used by students themselves is frequently much less damming (of themselves) with several explanations having more of an irreverent, rebellious or even creative nature. They talk of ‘beating the system’, ‘stretching the boundaries’ or ‘resistance’. Some of the terms include ‘wagging’, ‘skipping class’, ‘cutting class’, ‘taking a sickie’, ‘bludging’, ‘nicking off’ and ‘playing hookey’. This suggests that students do not see the relevance of school in meeting their aspirations in life. Whether this denotes a failure on the part of the student or the school is open to debate.

Until recently, the thrust of the research has focused on the perspectives of the various institutional stakeholders; for example, education systems, health and welfare agencies, church groups, the justice system and so on. The perspectives of each of these groups tends to reflect the nature of their interest in the issue, the way in which they define the problem and the solutions they deem appropriate for dealing with the issue of absenteeism. Rather than including the child’s perspective on their absenteeism, embracing the social, cultural, economic, educational and work aspirations of students, or indeed exploring the social forces which lead to ‘victim status’ for the students and their families, policy formation has been fragmented (Coventry, 1988; Gray & Beresford, 1992; Mulvaney, 1989; Kearney, 1903; Muirhead, 1996; Kierkus & Baer, 2002).

Government policies tend to focus on policing practices relating to the maintenance of social order and the educational status quo. This has involved surveillance and punishment. Legal sanctions apply when students refuse to conform to set boundaries of behaviour. For example, the Victorian Department of Education’s Victoria Student Attendance Guidelines
At the school level such policies involve extensive use of teacher’s and principal’s time for collecting and maintaining statistics which are used for public reporting and comparison with other schools. At the community level, they involve activities such as the ‘collection’ of students by police in ‘street sweeps’ in places frequented by students. The UK has taken this approach further than governments in Australia. Failure to ensure children attend school may result in fines of up to 2500 pounds or up to 3 months imprisonment for parents. In 2002, for example, an Oxfordshire mother was gaol for 60 days (Hastings, 2003).

Based on the literature, Mulvaney (1989, 227) outlines five main categories of sectorial intervention and response to absenteeism that illuminate the perspectives of the various institutional stakeholders. (1) The punitive law enforcement approach involves negative sanctions administered to ‘defiant’ and ‘bad’ children and their families. (2) The educational approach involves the examination of organisational practices, curricula and procedures existing in schools, which mitigate against student attendance, working on the assumption that formal education is necessary and absence could result in educational deprivation. (3) The psychological approach, which attributes absenteeism to problems existing in the interaction patterns within families, requires some form of clinical treatment. (4) The welfare approach, predicated on the belief that absenteeism is linked to family disorganisation and/or disruption, requires the intervention of a welfare worker. (5) And the non-interventionist approach contains a diversity of viewpoints, the main one being that compulsory enforcement of attendance is not the teacher’s role and could well exacerbate the situation. Rarely, until recent times, has the research focused on students’ voices or the perspectives of parents, nor has the anomaly of the student who is physically present but mentally absent while attending school been addressed.

Wardhaugh (1990:736), researching the British scene, understands the literature related to compulsory schooling and the ‘pathologisation of truancy’ as a dichotomy between care and control measures. Absent students and their families are categorised as having deviant social and personality backgrounds, and hence require monitoring and regulation in the form of boundary maintenance, punishment or surveillance to ensure compliance. Wardhaugh is particularly critical of behaviourist processes of categorisation in relation to truancy, which:

… draw equally on criminal models of deviance and medical models of sickness. Both models share a strong tendency towards categorisation of respectively, ‘delinquents’ and ‘patients’. Within these two models it is possible to identify a series of categories of truants, according to whether they are seen predominantly as ‘mad’, ‘bad’ or ‘sad’. (1990, p. 744)

Wardhaugh critiques truancy by utilising the distinctions between categories formulated by Paterson (1989), who refers to truants as either ‘fearful’ or ‘endangered’. The fearful truant is defined as ‘belonging to a caring, indeed often over-caring, home; [s/he] wishes to go to school but is afraid to do so, is an average or high-achiever, and remains at home while absent from school’ (Blagg, 1987, in Wardhaugh, 1990). The ‘endangered’ truant, on the other hand, is described as ‘the product of a neglectful, uncaring home; this type of truant is absent from school deliberately, is a low-achiever, and wanders the street in danger of falling into trouble when absent from school (Farrington, 1980; Reid, 1982 in: Wardhaugh, 1990:744). Wardhaugh places ‘the school phobic’ and ‘the abused truant’ in the ‘fearful’ category. Students fitting this profile are likely
to be subjected to various care methods. ‘The delinquent truant’ and ‘the morally endangered truant’ are likely to be placed in the endangered category and subjected to control measures.

Coventry (1988:99) cautions that deficit views of young people are frequently based on scant and, indeed, questionable evidence ‘which focuses primarily and almost exclusively on the institutionally labelled deficits of individual students’: the offenders. Rather, he points out that parents of truants are deeply concerned with the education of their children (1988, p.87) and that family background factors play a relatively minor or indirect role in the generation of truant behaviour (1988, p. 95). In contrast, Coventry’s research indicates that school and schooling play a central role in the promotion of truant behaviour (1988, p.98). Academic success and the perceived relevance of schooling are seen as two key factors in school centred explanations of truant behaviour. He cautions that ‘failure produces truancy and not the reverse’.

Lisa Delpit (1988, 280), in an article exploring power relationships in US classrooms of black and poor students, refers to their lack of voice as ‘the silenced dialogue’ and concludes that fundamental to empowering marginalised students is the need to communicate across cultures and to address the more fundamental issue of power: whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children and children of colour? According to Delpit, students need to be central to the ‘dialogue’. This is also reminiscent of Nancy Fraser’s (date?) notion of ‘standpoint epistemology’ and of Connell’s (1994) ‘curricula justice’ which begins from the standpoint of the least advantaged.

Recent research into absenteeism in Australia has taken up Delpit’s challenge, becoming more inclusive of student voice and more collaborative institutionally. Some studies are more so than others; the following examples illustrative of this variation, each more inclusive of students than the one that precedes it. For instance, Sainsbury (2001) describes a school-based study involving 126 Catholic, independent and government schools in Victoria in which a questionnaire about students was completed by teaching staff who best knew them. Key aspects of the questionnaire focused on personal, educational and community issues as well as family and socio-economic matters relating to the students. Recommendations resulting from the study included a set of ‘Guiding Principles’ with ‘a focus on individual students, on the specific skills, interests, associated talents and learning needs of each student (Sainsbury, 2001, p. 39). Whereas, Rothman’s (2002) research focused on data that allowed examination and comparison of attendance patterns for different groups of students including urban/rural, indigenous/non indigenous, cultural and gender groups in order to build a better understanding of rates of absence. Rothman acknowledges that the research does not explore the students’ reasons for non-attendance and recommends the use of student case studies to provide elaboration. He concludes that ‘truancy’ alone is not a reason for absence; rather, a range of factors, including illness, bullying and the nature of the curriculum, influence student decisions. He also advocates researching schools with high retention rates to identify positive attitudes and approaches to education. A third study by Kilpatrick (1996) was informed by interviews with students with histories of absenteeism. Perhaps surprisingly, his findings indicated that the students were quite positive about their schools, teachers and the curriculum. However, they had ‘high, if not unrealistically high, expectations relating to the school’s ability to prepare them for the workforce’ (Kilpatrick, 1996, p. 21). According to Kilpatrick, possible implications for schools would involve taking into account the students’ perceived needs – in this instance, providing a major vocational focus within the school curriculum. Coventry (1988) similarly describes the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education (VISE) study into truancy. It is of note because it was a major study involving 2376 Victorian students and, more importantly, gave a central data-gathering role to
absentees. Not only were the students empowered by their active participation in the research but they proved to be competent and reliable recorders of information.

Given the progress of research into absenteeism, there is now fresh opportunity for schools and other institutions to review their policies and practices. The current system, with a ‘one size fits all’ curricula, with its heavy reliance on reporting and penalties, needs to become more supportive, bringing together the resources of all entities involved to provide a student centred response. It needs to go beyond requiring students to return to a school system that has previously failed them. The system requires changes to curricula, student governance, teacher-student relationships, assessment practices, student participation and family and community interaction. As Coventry (1988, p. 100) notes, school practices need to minimise inequality and segregation and maximise long-range options for young people.

EMBODIED, SITUATED AND DIFFERENT

Policies and practices concerning absenteeism need to be reshaped in the light of the history of compulsory schooling described earlier and the associated categorisation of students as 'other', as outlined above. At present, category politics in Australia concerned with absenteeism ‘deflect attention away from needed but more deep-seated and threatening change’ (Bacchi & Eveline, 1996,p.98). Britzman et al (1991,p.89) declare that differences in class, race and gender backgrounds are being erased and that new sites of subordination are developing. In regard to the local social spaces that students occupy, consideration needs to be given to the economic, social and cultural backgrounds of particular students and the connection of their situatedness to global issues. That is, to position students adequately in the 21st century in relation to absenteeism, it is necessary to consider issues related to the distribution of material resources and to understand students’ as embodied, situated and different.

According to Gordon (1996,p.39), embodiment has received ‘little attention in educational research even though a great many of the practices in schools are worked on and through the body’. For Taylor (1993, p. 53), ‘embodied understanding’ is informed by what Bourdieu (1992) refers to as ‘habitus’: ways of being and doing. Gordon (1996,p.39) similarly notes that many of the norms and rules of schools relate to concepts of time and space, particularly concerning student movement, discipline and disruption, which carry bodily dimensions. Gordon thinks that embodiment is a social construction which also contains assumptions about gender, and specifically about gender difference’ (1996,p42). With regard to these gendered differences, Wardhaugh (1990, p.749) notes the double standard that is applied: ‘the male truant is thought of in danger of delinquency while illicitly outside the school regulated environment, the female truant is more frequently perceived as being in a position of moral danger’. Specifically, ‘this generally means criminal activity for young men and sexual delinquency for young women’. Apart from such simplistic separations of truant boys and girls, such accounts also lack nuance, treating all boys, for example, as a homogenous group, as the one body so to speak. It seems patently obvious to us that not all boys with low school attendance rates are or become criminally active and not all girls truanting from school are engaged or are destined to engage in sexual delinquency. It is important, then, to ask ‘which boys’ and ‘which girls’ become involved in such activities and ‘why’ (Collins, kenway & McLeod, 2000, pp.60-81).

Absentee students are also situated locally and geographically. Recent Australian studies of the relationships between local geographical and social place and an increasingly globalised world economy, attempt to address changes in society that
involve increasing attention to absenteeism. (Collins, Kenway and McLeod, 2000; Thomson, 2002; Teese & Polesel 2003). For example, Thomson (2002, pp. 64-67) explores the category of ‘students at risk’ (Batten and Russell, 1995) in terms of ‘which students’ in ‘which places’ in order to show how situated and local issues of educational disadvantage (like absenteeism) become decontextualised and thus conceal their relationship to global developments. Teese and Polesel (2003) similarly consider the social processes that cause disadvantage and ask the question ‘which students’ in ‘which location’ and ‘which sector’ of education is affected. They describe factors that cause early leaving and the social outcomes of labour market vulnerability, economic precariousness, welfare, unemployment, homelessness, addictive behaviours and vulnerability to the criminal justice system’ (2003,p.145).

The point here is that differences within categories are crucial to understanding the ways that absentee students are depicted. Often there appears little acknowledgement that student backgrounds are ‘multifaceted and complex, and oppositional categorisations are not appropriate’ (Gordon, 1996,p.38). Instead, dominant conceptions of absenteeism are culturally reductive, producing inaccurate and harmful stereotypes of male and female youth from so-called dysfunctional families of low socio-economic backgrounds (Wardhaugh, 1990, p.749). As argued above, Wardhaugh notes how these particular absentee students and their families first came to be thought of as deficient and in need of control. She cites Patterson’s (1988) findings of a study of the transformation of family patterns following the introduction of compulsory school attendance, which state that at that time over one hundred years ago ‘certain social and family relations came to be defined as inappropriate, including poverty, child employment, and ineffective (that is, lacking in authority) parenting (Wardhaugh, 1990, p.749).

However, the interplay of differences between absentee students needs to be understood in relation to socio-economic and cultural status. According to Dwyer and Stokes (1998) and Brooks et al. (1997) (in Collins et al 2000, p.84), disadvantages that relate to absenteeism need to be understood as part of ‘a process of production of discursive positions and material circumstances’ and that ‘it is the interplay of these discourses (of masculinity and femininity of class and geographical location etc) and how they contradict and accentuate each other that explains how disadvantage is constructed, interpreted and experienced in particular sites’. (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1994, p.20, in Collins et al., 2000, p.92).

**EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF DOMINANT ABSENTEEISM PRACTICES [LM]**

Absenteeism practices are predominantly based on assumptions drawn from functionalist sociology and behaviourist psychology. At the system level, solutions to absenteeism involve practices requiring extensive use of teachers’ and principals’ time for collecting and maintaining statistics that are used for public reporting and comparison with other schools. At the community level, they involve activities such as collecting students by police in ‘street sweeps’ in places frequented by students. At the individual (child or family) level, solutions to absenteeism involve the personal individual student or family in activities such as mentoring programs, walking children to school, psychological or health counselling and in these new times involve partnerships with parents in a policing role by obtaining their assistance to track students (use of mobiles and computers for reporting to them). At the institutional (individual classroom and school) level, they involve extrinsic rewards such as awards for best attenders, ‘stars’, ‘smarties’, vouchers to buy goods, breakfast programs, and so on. Increasingly in the new millennium, solutions to student absenteeism involve some kind of surveillance role involving tracking, monitoring or technological devices to change the control, nature and timing of rolcall practices (e.g.
pen and paper, computer). Functionalist sociological and behaviourist psychological assumptions have lead to the development of regulatory and disciplinary narratives informed by a concern for social order rather than a concern with the social changes that are facing students and their families.

Dominant views of absenteeism are of two main types involving ‘policing’ narratives and ‘healthist and welfarist’ narratives. Both of these narratives are concerned with the disciplining of bodies to maintain ‘social order’. This has the effect of producing what Foucault (1977, pp.135-169) calls ‘docile bodies’ that are easily able to be coerced and manipulated by others. The first of these ‘policing’ narratives relate to the exercise of authority, power and control involving issues of system accountability and policing of behaviour through some form of technological surveillance or boundary maintenance. This usually involves a process of reporting and tracking that results in some type of reward or punishment or some form of material response, classroom organisation some type of psychological or socially divisive imperative such as peer control which attempt to change matters such as school relations with the law, classroom and school attendance and monitoring practices. ‘Healthist and welfarist’ narratives of absenteeism related to individual and family physical or psychological stress of one kind or another involving physical and emotional well-being, violence, bullying, harassment and discrimination involving abusive and addictive behaviours e.g. legal and illegal drug taking concerned with changing student attitudes, family attitudes and teacher attitudes.

Social effects of dominant narratives of student absenteeism proffered are punitive in relation to the view of power that results and its accompanying sense of failure. Wardhaugh declares that ‘those defined as truants are also subject to a range of controls, based on the way in which they are categorised: the categorisation system itself is based on a pathology of truancy’ (1990, p.759). Punitive solutions to absenteeism accord with Foucault’s idea of ‘technologies of power’ that are regularising and normalising in their social effects on students because they ‘divide, distribute, select and exclude in the name of psychiatry and of the normal individual’ (Foucault, 1977, p.22). Students, especially poor students, ‘doing’ school in the presence of assumptions of absenteeism based on cultural and moral regulation mean that they come to experience power as ‘primarily oppressive’ which militate against learning of power as ‘productive’ (Luke & Gore 1992, p.67). Such experience of power in schools prevents poor children from developing a commitment to action because they are excluded from the exercise of self-management and decision making that fail to allow them to see that decisions advantage some and disadvantage others (Pettit, 1980, p.175). Large (1993) says that school decisions about ‘curriculum, administrative practices and subcultures have all been implicated in perpetuating differences and inequalities’ and that ‘avenues for voicing opinion and making change’ (1993, p.17) assist children to take responsibility in school processes. They need to ‘critically understand and confront the processes and structures of power in society’ in institutions that are ‘collaborative, less hierarchical and that create solidarity’. (Yates, 1993. pp.84-85). Kosky (1985,p.6) believes that approaches are needed that ‘influence the social climate of the school through the norm of concern for each other’ and not the opposite as is the case in punitive approaches to absenteeism.

Social processes of identity formation are central to the life of an individual. Dominant narratives of absenteeism position students and their families as passive (Wardhaugh, 1990, p.744) and involve the policing of desire (Watney 1987). Instead, they should empower humans as ‘subjects of their own desires, not objects of other peoples’ (Bauman, 2002). It is necessary to position students as active subjects in need of improved educational opportunities to ‘read’ the social and cultural world
(Davies, 1992, Freid, 1980) to the best of their abilities and create their own subjectivities accordingly, rather than be seen as alienated and passive resisters.

Dominant views of absenteeism that operate as technologies of power to exclude students have as their main concern what Foucault (1977,p.305) calls ‘examinatory’ justice, which results in ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu, 1992,pp.14-15) and ‘accomplishes itself through an act of cognition and misecognition that lies beyond – or beneath – the controls of consciousness and the will’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p.172). In order to address issues of structural inequality that produce and reproduce school failure implicated in absenteeism, Bourdieu (1992) considers them in terms of cultural capital, habitus and field. He considers that neglect of consideration of student cultural backgrounds leads to a form of education that produces and reproduces ‘symbolic violence’. A pedagogy of recognition and engagement is now urgently needed, which is appropriate for postmodern cultural conditions based on new principles that are both critical and socially just. This will require new pedagogies and practices that take account of the ‘unequal distribution of material resources and discourses of recognition’ (Fraser, in Collins, 2000, p.92).

WHAT NOW? WHY NOW?
In this account, a focus on attendance and absenteeism appears as a ‘structural’ policy response serving to hide more complex issues that governments and schools are unwilling and/or unable to address, or to which they appear blind. Three interrelated concerns arise, then, from this review: (1) the absence of attention to what schools and teachers could and might do to change their practices, that they might be contributing to ‘the problem’ not just responding to it; (2) the disregard for the futures of their students (and, by implication, a disregard for wider socio-economic and political dimensions), in the (unconscious, unconsidered) belief that students’ futures are similar to their own (it worked for me), not recognising changed social, economic, political conditions; and (3) the arrogance of the education community in claiming to know what is best for student absentees, in the absence of students’ and their parents’ consultation and participation in the process.

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