

A Comparative Study  
of Student Attitudes  
to Learning:  
Cuba and Australia

**Master of Education (research) Thesis**

**School of Education**

**Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development**

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## **Declaration of Authenticity**

“I, Joanne Williams, declare that the Master by Research entitled A Comparative Study of Student Attitudes to Learning: Cuba and Australia is no more than 60,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.”

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## **ABSTRACT**

It is widely agreed within educational research that student attitudes to learning and schooling are of critical importance. However it continues to be rare for research to draw on the perspectives of students themselves as valid data. Moreover, students are almost entirely absent from educational policy-making and processes of educational reform.

This project employed a collaborative social research methodology. It sought the perspectives of twenty Year 10 students in Melbourne's west, and twenty students of similar age in Havana, Cuba, using written cases and group interviews. The students offered their views on learning and schooling and then collaborated with the researcher to develop interpretative case summaries. The project demonstrates the usefulness of involving students actively in educational research not only from the perspective of improving student attitudes to learning, but also as a critical element of a democratic education capable of fostering an engaged and critical student population.

Cuba was chosen as a contrasting context with extensive experience in involving students in educational decision-making. The comparison between the two countries revealed both shared experiences and a range of differences, and illuminated the importance of understanding broader contextual influences on student attitudes and their relationship to the possibilities for reform.

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## GLOSSARY

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Services
AEU	Australian Education Union
ASRC	Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee
CDRs	Committees for the Defence of the Revolution
CTC	Confederation of Labour of Cuba
FEEM	Federation of Middle High School Students (Cuba)
FEU	Federation of University Students (Cuba)
FMC	Federation of Cuban Women
FOE	Friends of the Earth
FSS	Full Service Schooling
LLENs	Local Learning and Employment Networks
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MINED	Ministry of Education (Cuba)
MST	Landless Workers Movement (Brazil)
MWC	Melbourne West College
NOOSR	National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition
OPJM	José Martí Movement of Pioneers (Pioneros)
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PCC	Communist Party of Cuba
SAR	Students as Researchers
SATs	Student Action Teams
SRCs	Student Representative Councils
UJC	Union of Young Communists (Cuba)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VCAA	Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VCOS	Victorian Council of Social Services
VELS	Victorian Essential Learning Standards
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VSC	Vedado Secondary College

## Chapter 1.

### Introduction

...the comments of rebellion, resistance and rejection may be only the tip of an iceberg ... all young people suffer within educational approaches that bore them, devalue them, fail to inspire them, isolate and individualise them, and lock them out from significant and productive decision-making. They sit in classrooms, passively cooperating, even responding positively, but waiting for the bell; they learn that they only have value in terms of what they will become (deferred outcomes) rather than what they can contribute now (Holdsworth 2004, pg. 4).

The question of engagement of our young people in education holds social significance far beyond the education system and is an agreed issue of importance within contemporary education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation 2005; Essential Learning Prep to Year 10 Civics and Citizenship Curriculum Area 2004; Henry, Barty and Tregenza 2003; Kosky 2003; Fullarton 2002; Beare and Hughes 2001; Australian Centre for Equity through Education 2001; James, Leger and Ward 2001; Carneiro 2000; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 1999; Sturman 1997).

Accordingly, research on the topic is plentiful, with numerous studies revealing widespread dissatisfaction amongst youth in Australian schools. A wide range of literature exists in response, covering a range of topics from noting and attempting to improve retention rates, to the diverse discussion which continues under the banner of civics and citizenship education, attempting to redress the disconnection young people feel from civic life more generally.

And yet, in presenting their cases, an alarmingly small number of such studies seek the attitudes and perspectives of students themselves as valid data, and even fewer look to students when formulating possible solutions and alternatives. There is an obvious congruence between the experiences of students as passive actors within the educational experience and their almost complete absence from educational policy research and reform.

This study investigated and then compared the attitudes to learning of twenty students in Year 10 in Victoria and twenty students of similar age in Cuba. The two contrasting social and educational conditions provided a rich context for investigating both a) student learning attitudes in each socio-cultural setting, and b) comparing and contrasting distinctive findings to uncover shared and context specific experiences, values, attitudes *and* identify the impact and imperatives of the respective educational and social conditions.

By comparing educational practice in Australia with that of Cuba, a country with a great deal of experience in the pursuit of involving students in educational decision making, this study illuminates the value of empowering the traditionally “researched”, i.e., school students. It suggests that fundamental reform of the education system, to facilitate such engagement, should be considered as a matter of educational, as well as social urgency.

### **Student Attitudes to Learning**

Without exception, recent key documents in educational policy, planning and evaluation in Victoria refer to student attitudes to learning as important. For example (Kosky 2003; Fullarton 2002; James, Leger et al. 2001; Bradshaw, Clemans, Donovan and Macrae 2001; Kirby 2000; Connors 2000). Similarly, a review of school web sites reveals that student attitudes to their schooling remain a predominant focus of secondary school charters and mission statements across Victoria<sup>1</sup>. Often, both school charters and policy documents refer to their commitment to the “major stakeholders” of education in their consultation processes. However, it is alarmingly rare for students to be centrally involved, if at all, in these discussions (some notable exceptions exist, for example; (James, Leger et al. 2001; Australian Centre for Equity through Education 2001) and (Cormack and Cumming 1996). While the reports themselves fail to recognise the absence of student contribution as a weakness, this study concurs with existing research, e.g.(Gitlin 1990) that this fundamentally undermines their validity and usefulness.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example; Sunshine Secondary College [www.sunshine.vic.edu.au](http://www.sunshine.vic.edu.au); Hoppers Crossing Secondary College <http://web.hopcross.vic.edu.au>; Bayside College [www.bayside.vic.edu.au](http://www.bayside.vic.edu.au); and Northcote High School [www.nhs.vic.edu.au](http://www.nhs.vic.edu.au)

Apparently, student learning is a paramount concern for educational research. Why then does it not follow that students can and should play an important and valid role in contributing to the understanding of learning processes? Arguably, this conception of students as passive, inactive or at best re-active agents of the educational process creates one of the most fundamental barriers to real educational change. Student attitudes are considered for their quantitative value for academic theorising but not as substantive contributions to theoretical development in themselves. A growing acceptance of the validity of practitioner research, and the usefulness of self-reflection as a basis for inquiry can and should be extended to students.

Moreover, the discussion that takes place in schools and the community more broadly regarding student attitudes to learning is often conducted in isolation from the complex socio-political factors that contextualise the approach of students, see for example (Cuttance 2001; Ainley, Batten, Collins and Withers 1998).

### **Significance of research and contribution to new knowledge**

This research is significant in three ways. Firstly, in challenging the notion of students as passive recipients of education, and in relating to them as potential contributors themselves, this study makes a new and significant contribution to the existing paradigms in educational research. Secondly, the commitment to accurately and respectfully represent the attitudes of students regarding their own learning has ensured a valuable contribution to what currently exists as a narrow and limited area of research. Thirdly, by comparing student attitudes and experiences in two different contexts, new insights have been obtained which can inform improved practices and hopefully facilitate a greater understanding of different educational perspectives.

Importantly, in actually conducting research with young people, about their attitudes and experiences of schooling, this study sought to generate valid and reliable findings and also to legitimise the involvement of *students as researchers* through the use and development of a non-traditional methodological approach based on a number of existing models – namely, *collaborative social research*. This approach, outlined in Chapter 3, was considered essential in capturing the social practices of classrooms and student learning experiences to enable us to more accurately understand student attitudes and their impact on learning outcomes.

## Comparing Australia with Cuba

The current discussion and reconceptualisation of comparative and international research in education (Crossley and Watson 2003) provided a framework for the comparative component of this study. It is considered that it makes a useful and relevant contribution to the growing collection of such research internationally. The anticipated significance of context and culture was confirmed in theory and practice through this study. Ultimately, an understanding of the social, political and economic context in each country proved the *only* way to explain actual phenomena encountered through the data. Very quickly the interconnectedness of most aspects of the findings illuminated the bigger picture questions of philosophy and society.

The significant success the Cuban education system has achieved by international standards (Hynds and Navarro 2002; Lutjens 2000; Bellamy 1999; Oficina Regional de Educación Para América Latina y El Caribe, United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1998; Eckstein 1997) suggests its unique approach merits closer analysis by educationalists whether critical or supportive of Cuba's political establishment. The usefulness of such research is further confirmed by Gasperini's observation that Cuba demonstrates in practice, many of the new initiatives championed in the growing international body of research on school quality and effectiveness (Gasperini 2000).

Generally any public mention of Cuba's education system refers to the impressive statistics which have been gathered by such organisations as UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund), and which refer to a range of aspects including academic results, participation rates, and retention rates. Impressive, because they are consistently better than the average in South and Central America and in many cases the United States, despite the neo-colonial subjugation of the country. This study sought to uncover the lesser-known experiences of students in Cuba, and investigate their apparent success in fostering student engagement.

Given the specific objectives of the study, the experiences of Cuba provided a valid contrast with those of Australia. In formulating educational policy, the Cuban Department of Education consults students and teachers at every level. The vast majority of both

students and teachers are involved in mass citizens' organisations, the conferences of which are referred to directly as a standard procedure (Lutjens 2000).

In Cuba, education is characterised by its centrality, and relationship, to the broader socialist objectives of the country, and a commitment to democratic participation at all levels (Hurtado, Hernández, Conte, Alfonso and Rodríguez 2000). In the words of Cuban President Fidel Castro, a strong emphasis on formal education "... helps raise the general technical, cultural, and political level of society as a whole, a necessary component of the expansion of democracy." (Castro 1983, pg. 9) Broadly speaking formal education in Cuba consists of "...a complex network of organised activities intended to educate within and outside the schools." (Lutjens 2000) Cuba's mass people's organisations such as the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR's) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) organise a range of educational activities for their membership and also impact on developments within schools.

The centrality of mass citizens' organisations to Cuban educational planning and implementation of policy is also characteristic of other socialist orientated countries, for example Nicaragua (Arnove 1981). In Cuba, there is a strong tradition of involvement in mass organisations for students, with membership almost universal (though not compulsory) in; Los Pioneros or The Pioneers – a mass primary school aged children's organisation "deeply integrated with daily life in schools" (Lutjens 2000); La Federación de Estudiantes de Enseñanza Media (FEEM) a mass secondary students organisation; and La Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU) for university students. Involvement in these mass organisations is a significant aspect of a broader approach and commitment to youth, which seeks to foster a high level of social consciousness and civic responsibility.

The research undertaken in Cuba revealed a fundamentally different situation to the problem riddled education systems under capitalism throughout the world, which are faced with issues such as inequality, low-retention and student disengagement. This study involved a small sample of students, and as such does not suggest that all Cuban students would subscribe to the opinions of the participants of this study. Alternative perspectives and the Cuban government's responses to them are investigated here as part of the research but regarded as exceptions to the general attitudes of students. Even the most politically critical and anti-social Cuban citizen, whilst hustling tourists in the streets of Old

Havana, will happily tell you of their wonderful schooling experience and all that they learnt from their classmates and terrific teachers, a consciousness explored in Robledo (Robledo 1999). This point is significant and one of several which make a study of education in Cuba so interesting, and pertinent with regards student attitudes to learning.

In Cuba, the influence of the socio-political context on community and individual is a fundamental determinant. However, this is not to exclude the relatively independent influence of a democratic education system. In the context of this study, the intention was to look at how existing political institutions and socio-economic structures shape student attitudes to learning, and to make tentative comparisons and generalisations to enable positive change. The Cuban system provides a wealth of lessons for reform in the Australian setting. A comparative study of student attitudes to learning with the Victorian education system has proven valuable not only at a theoretical level but also in elaborating alternative ideas and practical models for the Australian context.

### **Recommendations for Reform**

This study illuminates the need for a system wide reappraisal of both the philosophy and the practical delivery of education in Australia, and calls for an education based on the notion of education as community and democratic principles. Concrete recommendations for reform are presented which challenge existing notions of student participation, educational as well as broader social change and the possibilities for a genuinely democratic schooling. While challenging, it is argued that such challenges are critical to ensuring an engaged student population, with educational skills and experience to actively participate in the shaping of our future, based on principles of social justice and equality.

The report presents an extensive literature review, and a philosophical framework for this research in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 introduces and explains the Collaborative Social Research model and describes the developing methodology employed throughout this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings in the Australian context and Chapter 5 presents the findings in the Cuban context. Through a theoretical comparative analysis of the two sets of data, the final chapter presents a framework for the authentic engagement of young people as well as specific recommendations for reform.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical framework for the research**

Student attitudes, like all social consciousness, are fundamentally determined by the social existence of students – the historically constituted complex of socio-economic relations that today characterise the political economy and dominant cultures of global capitalism. This understanding runs counter to the fashionable post-structuralist and post-modernist charge that this essentially Marxist analysis is deterministic and without account of human agency (Hill, McLaren, Cole and Rikowski 2002b; Callinicos 1989). The social existence, or to use Marx's terminology, the social being of the individual sets parameters and establishes the fundamental characteristics of consciousness, but it does not do so mechanically or without the variation that necessarily results from the infinite combination of individual experiences and psychological tendencies of individuals (Marx 1983).

In framing this study theoretically, and from an epistemological point of view, it is considered that the most relevant literature is that which falls within the sociological and philosophical traditions of Marx, Habermas, and Freire. The materialist and historical conception of social relations and the dialectical notion of change lend themselves best to exploring any paradigms of student attitudes that may be discernable. Trends in consciousness or attitudes are considered social phenomena that are best understood by a socio-historical study of their real life and concrete development. This process of development is perceived as ever changing and shaped by its contradictions, in other words as a dialectical process. Understanding the complexity of student attitudes is a matter of investigating students' reality in all its particularities, and how such particularities are generated by the complex inter-relation of the school environment and the many other layers of social relations (Habermas 1989; Therborn 1980, pg. 317-413).

### **Defining education**

Education is considered here as a historically constituted institution – a complex web of contradictions, consisting of dynamics of both socio-economic progress and social power.

These dynamics are categorised into 3 major dimensions – the socio-economic, the political and the ideological (Ponce 1993).

At the socio-economic level, education is considered as an institution for the reproduction of labour (Marx 1964). Education plays the role of developing the necessary level of labour skilling in any given socio-economic formation. Depending on the socio-economic complexity of any given society, education is more or less complex in its own internal institutional dynamics (Ponce 1993).

Education also reproduces the dominant political relations of society, be it ancient, feudal or capitalist. The educational institution tends to mirror the political-power relations of society at large (Ponce 1993). Most fundamentally, from the point of view of content, education reproduces the socially dominant ideology (Teese and Polesel 2003; Hill 2001b; Apple 1999b; Freire 1998; Freire 1970).

In his analysis of education under advanced capitalism, McLaren summarises both functions.

The hidden curriculum, or ‘pedagogical unsaid’, is nothing new, although the ideological state apparatuses have made it a more sophisticated enterprise. Its function is largely the same as it was during earlier phases of industrial capitalism: to deform knowledge into a discrete and decontextualised set of technical skills packaged to serve big-business interests, cheap labour, and ideological conformity (McLaren 2000, pg. 33).

In his major work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that capitalism suffocates the development of the independently thoughtful and critical student actor. His explanations remain applicable today.

Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression (Freire 1970, pg. 59).

Che Guevara, a major contributor to the philosophy of Cuban education post the 1959 revolution, in characterizing the formation of capitalist consciousness, explains it as follows.

Capitalism uses force, but it also educates people in the system. Direct propaganda is carried out by those entrusted with explaining the inevitability of class society... this lulls the masses, since they see themselves as being oppressed by an evil against which it is impossible to struggle (Guevara 2003, pg. 217).

The effect of capitalist ideology, understood as the complex of dominant social ideas, norms and intellectual and cultural trends in contemporary society, is to encourage passivity amongst students and to prevent them from developing a critical consciousness, which would see them not only conscious of their potentially creative roles in society as transformers of the world, but also of the education process itself. The education institution prevents the student from naming the world they live in, severing them from any potentially creative role in it and disempowering them as individuals (McLaren 2000; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Reimer 1973). Freire continues, pointing out that as well as the *content*, the *form* of the education institution also prevents students from developing the skills required to contribute positively to educational policy and development (Freire 1970).

Apple also refers to the reproduction of dominant ideology through the education system, stating that "...education as a set of institutions and as a cultural and ideological practice is strongly connected to the maintenance and the possible subversion of unequal power" (Apple 1999b, pg. 10).

The ideological function is at the heart of a Marxist analysis of the education system. Marx stated in *The German Ideology* that

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force (Marx and Engels 1976, pg. 64).

Education is understood as a critical thread in the ideological web of capitalism, necessarily stifling student development. In 1915 Dewey questioned an education system which he saw

as only representing the values of the upper class (Dewey 1916). The Nicaraguan revolutionary Tomàs Borge, formulates it in the following way.

Education is the process through which society reproduces the ideas, moral and ethical principles, and behavioural habits of the successive generations. All social organisation is a function of the class interests that hold state power. Education is a process of forming individuals in ideology, in a complex system of values and ideas that justifies the interests of the class which wields state power (Borge 1985, pg. 72).

Understood this way the educational setting becomes an institution which stifles individual creativity rather than promote it. The individual must be intellectually formed to meet existing social needs, the totality of socio-economic, political and ideological needs of capitalism, rather than to promote individual creativity (Freire 1970).

### **The Banking Concept of Education**

In his formulation of the “banking concept of education”, Freire argues that students are seen as empty containers to be filled by the teacher, using a deposit transaction at a bank as an analogy. A process which “(by) projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry.” (Freire 1970, pg. 53) Freire’s critique is applied to the question of both form and content of education, as the process of critical inquiry inextricably binds them.

In critiquing what she calls Modern Western education, Broadfoot speaks of

...the discourse that defines educational issues in terms of a delivery model of *education* in which countless thousands of children and young people throughout the world are more or less successfully processed through centrally-determined curriculum packages, and taught to compete with each other in the business of regurgitating their knowledge in specific ways (Broadfoot 2000, pg. 6-7).

In the contemporary context of an increasingly corporatised, in this case U.S education system, Giroux’s discussion of the changing role of the teacher is illuminating.

The main role of the teacher-turned-classroom manager is to legitimate through mandated subject matter and educational practices a market-based conception of the learner as simply a consumer of information (Giroux 2000, pg. 92).

(Cullingford 2002), (Holdsworth 2000), (Harber 1997), (Falbel 1996), (Illich 1973), (hooks 1994), (Levitas 1974) and (Reimer 1973) in their various critiques of education systems, make further contributions albeit in very different ways to the theoretical argument espousing the need for greater student involvement and hence empowerment in the learning environment. The belief that students can and should play a vital role in the process of educational reform is central, and that as Freire asserts "...to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects." (Freire 1970, pg. 66)

The implications (and their interconnectedness) of such a belief for both educational theory and practice are well understood by Cuban pedagogical theorists.

The definition of the student as an object of learning is an erroneous conceptualisation...in the process [of teaching] the dialectical relationship between dependence and independence is manifested, which is resolved in favour of the latter through the solution of problems by the student (Zayas 1999, pg. 4&50).<sup>2</sup>

The process of student involvement is understood not as a mechanism by which to coerce students into adapting to the existing learning environment, but as a total process of self-empowerment and education (Freire 1970). In her study of the pedagogical thought of Che Guevara, Martí emphasises the relationship between such self-empowerment and social collaboration.

The process of education in a collectivist framework, the achievement of a capacity to commit to a collective task, presupposes the enrichment of individuality oriented

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<sup>2</sup> This translation from Spanish to English, along with all others appearing in this thesis have been carried out by the author with assistance from Jorge Jorquera, with the author assuming responsibility for any errors.

to making personal decisions, defending ones point of view and realizing ones interests with fundamental satisfaction (Martí 1999, pg. 13).

### **The contemporary educational context**

Questions of how to actively or fully engage students in their learning process remain relevant when discussing contemporary classroom practice (Holdsworth 2000), and certainly when working within the established paradigms of educational research (Gitlin 1990). By and large, and there are important and notable exceptions, student input into the development of education curriculum continues to be considered a radical albeit desirable process. Just as it continues to be expected that teachers will passively accept the findings of academic educational research as true and valid, students continue to be required to accept their teachers and the curriculum as infallible and complete. Given that they are rarely offered the space to contribute pro-actively to the practice in their classroom it is not surprising that students have no opportunity to influence broader policy developments.

Pearl concurs with this in his discussion of the possibility of democracy in education.

Student opinion of important knowledge is arbitrarily dismissed. In a democratic classroom student opinion is given serious consideration (Pearl 2000, pg. 4).

Other literature, particularly in the area of research methodology points to the benefits of looking to and involving the main social actors in education. In doing so, they establish a clear link between theory and practice not only within educational research, but as a philosophical foundation for creating positive learning experiences in the educational setting (Grundy 1998; Splitter and Sharp 1995). One outcome has been the development of more collaborative and inclusive methodologies. E.g. participatory action research claims that

Research in its pursuit of truths is not the sole domain of highly trained university based scientists. Today people undertaking participatory action research acknowledge that “knowledge is power” and confront those who want to monopolise the definitions and production of knowledge. Vigorous and valid

research can be conducted by people in everyday circumstances; PAR is a credible, needed source of knowing our world (Smith, Willms and Johnson 1997, pg. 176).

Further, in his argument for educative research, Gitlin asserts that

...educative research views traditionally excluded groups – teachers, students and parents – as having the authority to produce knowledge. This authority not only suggests a right to participate in research, but an opportunity to enter into a dialogical process where the researcher avoids imposing meaning... (Gitlin 1990, pg. 448).

The 1993 report on the National Schools Project, in highlighting its positive outcomes, recognised that "...even very young students are capable of participating actively in the process of shaping their own learning objectives, learning environment and working habits." (Sawatzki 1993, pg. 4) In *A National Declaration for Education 2001*, the propositions arising from deliberations at the Education Assembly 2001 include a call for broader involvement including from students in educational policymaking (Beare and Hughes 2001).

In this context, the critical questions are how to understand the problem of student learning and engagement and can they be investigated effectively in a research environment where those at the core of the issues are virtually ignored?

### **Public Reports**

In general, there is an alarming absence of student participation and perspective in the research, review and development process of education and education policy in Australia. Of approximately 580 written reports submitted as part of the consultation process of the document, *Public Education: The Next Generation* (Connors 2000) known colloquially as the PENG report, 6 were from student groups. Of the 19 focus group research meetings, none involved students. As part of the direct "consultation with specific organisations" which would help ensure "...access to those with a direct interest in schools..." one student group was consulted, The Victorian Student Leadership Council (Connors 2000, pg. 69).

While not discounting the potential contribution made by such a body, it is important to acknowledge that it is a peak body which arguably is likely to involve a small number of students who are already engaged qualitatively beyond normal student participation. Despite repeated references throughout the document to the importance of student attitudes and student engagement, there is no suggestion that the lack of student input was a concern or even a weakness. It would also be interesting to know if any students in Victoria have seen, or been asked to reflect upon the findings of the report, or *The National Goals of Schooling* as presented within that report as Appendix 5.

A review of The Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework presented in 2000 asserts that the consultative process involved all “interested parties”. No evidence of student participation is evident (Kotur 2000). Similarly, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s (VCAA) report on the consultation process which led to the development of the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) reveals that students were not involved. (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004b) The VCAA website informs that “(t)he *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* have been developed through extensive consultation and collaboration with schools, the teaching profession, education researchers, education sectors and the broader community” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005), with no mention of students.

The Victorian Government’s Blueprint for Education which led to the development of VELS, did draw upon significant data generated through an online survey of parents and students on the Better Schools Website. However, despite a recommendation from the report presenting the survey findings that the “...further regular use of [www.betterschools.com.au](http://www.betterschools.com.au) may provide a very effective base for ongoing communication about and review of schools in Victoria,” (Ryan and Islam 2003, pg. 37) it now appears inaccessible.

It could be argued that the established culture of ignoring students within educational planning and policy is reflected even more broadly, within recent documents of the Australian Education Union, Victoria Branch. E.g. in its response to the PENG report, the Union discusses students only in the context of student welfare, making no mention of the role students could play in such an educational discussion (Graham 2000).

In the context of the increasingly vocational nature and requirements of education (Marginson 1997a), the *Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* (Kirby 2000), is an important document. Based on a range of quantitative statistical data, it makes several assertions about the needs and desires of young people with regard education and training. However, given the positive emphasis it places on engaging students, it is disappointing that there is not one reference to student consultation as part of the review. Again, this is not recognised as a weakness. Moreover, it could be argued that this report, along with others in the ongoing discussion about pathways for young people e.g. (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee 2002), ignores or at best, fails to satisfactorily respond to, the overall context of the school-work-retirement divide under capitalism. The pathways approach involves a contestable abstraction - the idea that young people's aspirations and possibilities are largely self-made, or at least overwhelmingly determined by immediate social factors, rather than determined by a socio-historical social complex (see for example (Willis 1983; Teese 2000)). As a result, despite making accurate and positive observations about changes required it lacks the ability to effect real change. The key initiatives in this area in Victorian education at the moment – Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs), On Track etc are discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

### **Middle Years Research**

One important body of research, of significance to this study, is the diverse research investigating the middle years (5-9) as a distinct period of schooling. It is significant to this research in two ways; firstly because of the conclusions drawn by the overwhelming majority of reports and projects regarding student learning and motivation, and secondly because it includes several exceptions to the standard practice of ignoring student voices in educational research.

In Australia in recent years, much attention has been given to the middle years of schooling, in particular the apparent lack of engagement amongst students at the middle school level. The broad range of conferences, programs and initiatives addressing this question have drawn similar conclusions; that student centred and cooperative learning is important, that people learn through doing and that learning is an active process, that relationships between students and their peers and teachers are important, and that

students in the middle years relate to relevant issues and topics which affect them, examples include (Henry, Barty et al. 2003; Centre for Applied Educational Research. Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne 2002; Edwards 2000; Earl 2000; Cormack and Cumming 1996). These and indeed most of the findings from the extended and broad middle years research while not always explicitly, contribute to the call for greater and more active student participation in shaping the future of schooling.

In *Reinventing Education in the Middle Years* Earl asserts that

For young adolescents the value of their learning is measured by the connection to their own experience, or experiences that they can imagine, and the amount of risk that the learning poses for them. They are particularly motivated by exploring and engaging in activities that have an impact on others or are rooted in social issues... Young adolescents can learn the metacognitive skills that they need to control their own learning. When they have skills like planning, organisation, monitoring the effectiveness of attempts, revising and refocusing, they are ready to use their prior knowledge and access new knowledge to increase their understanding (Earl 2000, pg. 21).

Based on such research and as attempts to address some of the findings, a range of programs and initiatives has been implemented. One example is the establishment of Student Action Teams (SAT's).

Key challenges, which face the middle years of schooling, are enhancing student engagement in learning and reducing the risk of alienation and isolation. SAT's address these challenges while simultaneously increasing students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and connectedness to school (Australian Youth Research Centre. Department of Education and Training 2003).

According to a manual prepared to assist schools in setting them up, Student Action Teams are based on the following concepts.

- Students can make serious and important decisions;
- Students can do important and valuable things: they have skills, expertise and a knowledge of the needs of their community;
- Important action can be taken as part of students' learning in school: community focused research and action is an appropriate educational approach for schools. (Australian Youth Research Centre. Department of Education and Training 2003, pg. 6).

### **Studies of student attitudes**

Given the effectively unanimous agreement on the need to better understand student perspectives on their learning, the useful and interesting results of studies and/or projects, which have looked to students for qualitative data, should not be surprising.

The literature on student attitudes to their learning exists in many varied forms, from large-scale research studies in an educational context to broader studies of youth attitudes. Perhaps the largest and most significant of the Australian studies, is *Making the Difference*, in which the authors suggest that "...social research can become more democratic" when it is participatory and has the intent of empowering the traditionally researched (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett 1982, pg. 216).

There are several examples of newspapers publishing, in varying forms, comments from students about their schooling experiences and aspirations. In a recent article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Doherty notes that

In 1967 The Observer newspaper in Britain ran a competition, asking children to design their dream school. The students wanted to abolish exams, do a single piece of work for a week, and make their lessons relevant to real life (Doherty 2005a).

While around 1000 students responded to *The Observer's* competition, some 15,000 primary and secondary students submitted entries to *The Guardian* when they ran a similar competition in 2001. Birkett reports that

The School I'd Like competition has unleashed the most imaginative, stimulating and provocative challenges to our educational system. And those challenges have come entirely from children. Entrusted with designing their own schools, where they spend an average working week, they have grasped the opportunity. They want change (Birkett 2001).

Here in Australia in 1971, the then Australian Union of Students, representing university students, organised a competition inviting students to submit essays based on the concept of "The school for me". *Schools Out!* (Humphreys and Newcombe 1975) presents some of the illuminating comments received from students. It offers well-informed, insightful reflections on such aspects of contemporary schooling as curriculum, assessment, governmental policy and teaching. Many of the students who participated offered their own versions of the Freire concept of "banking education" in their criticisms of their schooling experience, and indeed their own versions of a better alternative.

It would be senseless to provide an education that stresses independence and demands reason in a society that is based on obeying instructions unquestionably as it would be to base education on the acceptance of the authority of others in a society that expects personal initiative and independence. The society – and hence education – for me, would above all, be based on the concept of learning as a personally satisfying and intellectually stimulating experience for everyone concerned. It would view the gaining of knowledge not as an ivory tower academic pursuit, but as the vital, rewarding and emotional experience it should be.

Jack, 17

When using the word 'education', we must realise it is not merely a drumming of information into a pupil's head. Education in schools should also be a way of inducing a free flow of ideas and questions from students to teachers and vice versa, and a training to live effectively and to function satisfactorily in society.

Jennifer, 14

The ideal school for me is one where the students have an active part in the running of the school. After all what is a school for if it is not to educate and prepare students for life in an adult world; and how can they do this if the students are unsatisfied with the way in which they are being educated.

Roselyn, 16

It is important to note that participation in the Schools Out! project necessitated students reading an advertisement in *The Australian* newspaper. The assumption is that such a process discounted many students from being involved and also raises questions of the breadth of student participation in general.

A competition run by *The Sydney Morning Herald* recently, asking NSW students to discuss “The School I’d Like” generated more contemporary reflections on schooling. Recurring themes included greater relevance in content, more cooperation and problem solving, respect and exchange of ideas between teachers and students, and better facilities and resources, especially with regards to technology. Shay Wafer from Parramatta Marist High School saw school as “society’s means of converting talents into tools.” Fellow student Etiuate Veamatahau expressed himself through rap.

Let’s change the way we learn

Let’s change the way we sit

Let’s change the way teachers treat us

You see, the old way isn’t working for us (Doherty 2005b)

*Making Connections: The evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools (FSS) Program* presents as a positive contrast to other Australian governmental reports (James, Leger et al. 2001). While it too presents various needs and desires of students, particularly those considered to be “at risk”; they have been directly obtained from students involved in the research process. Student input was sought during the development of the FSS initiative via interviews and focus groups, and the evaluation process made a conscious commitment to student feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the various programs they were involved in. *Room to Move* (Bradshaw, Clemans et al. 2001), another report based on the FSS program, also highlights an approach which involves student input in its presentation of a number of

case studies. It could certainly be argued that this approach provides a more credible and rounded document with regards student involvement and learning, and that perhaps as a result, the recommendations of the evaluation have a greater potential for effective and meaningful change for students. Discussion further in the chapter explores the contextual restraints which obstruct such meaningful change.

An innovative, large-scale study carried out in the UK between 1995 and 1997, involving 10,000 young people, sought to investigate their views on education, work and social issues. Organised by a London based consultancy agency, The Work Foundation, at the time known as The Industrial Society the 2020 Vision Campaign included an action component, which involved work with a range of local organisations to plan practical reforms based on its findings. The research revealed a strong emphasis on involvement, life skills, learning through doing and the need/desire for greater student choice within education (Gardiner 1998). Another study, which looks specifically at the links between class, schooling and employment outcomes, reveals similar attitudes amongst its participants (Willis 1983).

### **The limitations of Studies *of* student attitudes**

Having presented several positive examples of such student focused research, it is important to recognise and analyse the several weaknesses that persist. Firstly the studies are, by and large content to remain studies *of* student attitudes, simply providing interesting commentary or validations for existing theories. Further, those that employ quantitative methods remain student attitudes as interpreted by the researcher and as such have the potential to stray far from the original meaning of the data, and as a result, may have limited potential in affecting positive change, for example (Ainley, Batten et al. 1998). Because students are so rarely involved in the analysis aspect of the research process these studies tend to fit the student-generated data to existing theories about students and learning. This study sought to create a framework that enabled the student-researchers to challenge and/or affirm hypotheses on student learning through their involvement in the interpretation of data.

Some criticisms of student generated data make a useful contribution to developing a practical model for such research, while others reflect the negative and patronizing attitudes which have permeated educational philosophy for so many years. Hopkins

recommends the use of pupil diaries and student work samples, not as the primary data source, but as complementary data useful for triangulation. However he questions student subjectivity, suggesting that it is difficult for younger children to record their thoughts and feelings and is concerned about possible ethical dilemmas given that it is not established practice to ask students directly (Hopkins 1993, pg. 122). Leaving aside whether or not Hopkins' concerns are a valid reason to avoid student generated data, the use of such tools as pupil diaries and work samples warrants another, perhaps more pressing question. Are they simply representative of the students' ability to respond as they assume they are expected to in a particular classroom situation?

It is also interesting to note that similar arguments have long been made about the possibilities for genuine practitioner research; that it is too threatening to be self reflective, that it is too difficult to apply a clear theoretical framework, that bias and subjectivity are immediate and unavoidable concerns and so on. In refuting such assertions, various studies have developed methodologies which consider practitioner research to be both valid and necessary for effective change and educational reform, for example (Cherednichenko, Gay, Hooley, Kruger and Mulraney 1998; Gitlin 1990).

### **The economic imperatives behind educational policy reform**

In 2001, both of the major political parties in Australia released documents outlining their vision for education in the next period (Cuttance 2001; Jones 2001). While both refer to the need to increase student engagement, and include principles which appear to move in the direction of a more democratic and inclusive education, both emphasise, as the most valuable aspect of education, its market value, rather than the creative value of the educational process as viewed from a societal point of view.

The Australian Labor Party's *The Knowledge Nation*, asserts that in general, a greater emphasis on education is required, in particular better access and more resources, with a commitment to a broad range of fields. Recommendation 11 is particularly significant for this study, calling for stronger links between schools and universities and suggesting that students need

...a variety of experiences, encouraging a spirit of curiosity, excitement and their capacity for conceptual thinking to make linkages, form judgments, and to feel a sense of empowerment in a variety of disciplines, including language, music, art, sport, mathematics and communications (Jones 2001, pg. 11).

Although these principles (and others in the document) appear to move in the direction of a more democratic and inclusive education, they must be understood in the context of the ALP's current (and historical) perspectives for the Australian political economy. The document seems to be more closely related to a strategy of skilling Australia in order to maximise opportunities for Australia's more competitive industries, rather than with genuine community based reform. This is evidenced when examining the education policy of previous ALP state and federal governments, especially since the 1983 federal Hawke ALP government, and their approach to issues including funding, research priorities, and institutional restructuring.

In reading the Liberal Party's *School Innovation: Pathway to the Knowledge Society*, no fundamental, or philosophical, difference between the education policies of the two parties is evident, despite some differences in the language used. The terminology used in Liberal Party policy is unambiguous - the market value of education is the stated paradigm of all individual policy considerations.

Schooling is the engine of the future knowledge society - displacing the farm, the mine and the services sector as the primary infrastructure for building future generations (Cuttance 2001).

Unlike ALP policy, the Liberal Party does not provide any notable, if isolated policy initiatives, for the purposes of negotiating support from disenfranchised sections of the community. All Liberal policy is aimed and expressed in terms of maximizing the benefit of education from the point of view of industries in particular and profit margins in general.

The two vision statements reflect the ever-increasing subordination of educational policy development internationally to the needs of the capitalist market economy in an age of increasing competition and concentration of industry and finance (Hill 2002a; Rikowski 2002). This trend continues despite the growing body of educational research which

encourages movement in the opposite direction (Hill 2002a; Smyth, Hattam and Lawson 1998; Marginson 1997a; Whitty 1997; Welch 1996).

A key contradiction for contemporary education policy centres on how to produce the levels of skilling required by the increasing technological and administrative complexity of the capitalist political economy. Given the socio-cultural parameters of modernity, or post modernity, student exclusion is not a realistic option (Ponce 1993). This leaves open a permanent debate on controlled student involvement, explaining, in part, the continued research on the subject.

How to transcend this debate and explore the possibilities of student involvement for social and individual change, rather than as oil in the wheel of labour reproduction, was therefore an important element of this investigation.

### **Contextualising education**

Educational policy development is contextualised by the exigencies of market competition and technological change, and by the political and ideological demands of given historical periods (Ponce 1993).

In contrast, progressive and liberal critique has the problem of situating itself in more than text (Noffke 1995), somehow embracing a counter social reality. Without such a reality, reform projects are either lost altogether or see isolated elements integrated into the mainstream agendas.

It is this lack of context which Bowles and Gintis address when criticizing the weaknesses of many educational reform attempts. They point out that educational institutions are only one of many which perpetuate but do not in and of themselves cause social inequality, and that such inequality is firmly based in the economic structures of the capitalist system.

The social problems to which these reforms are addressed have their roots not primarily in the school system itself, but rather in the normal functioning of the economic system. Educational alternatives which fail to address this basic fact join a club of venerable lineage: the legion of school reforms which, at times against the

better intentions of its leading proponents, have served to deflect discontent, depoliticise social distress, and thereby have helped to stabilise the prevailing structures of privilege (Bowles and Gintis 1976, pg. 245).

This limitation inevitably extends to school and community based discussions on student attitudes to learning. If and when school and community based discussions regarding student attitudes to learning take place, they are often linked to a particular incident or issue or one aspect of the curriculum. For example, a discussion on student attitudes to learning becomes focused almost entirely on the concept of student management and discipline. Similarly and regrettably some studies on student attitudes to learning are also conducted in isolation from the complex socio-political factors that contextualise the approach of students (Ainley, Batten et al. 1998; Cuttance 2001, pg. 101-121). In the area of curriculum reform Teese concurs with this. He claims that “(c)urriculum structure is a translation of social structure” (Teese 2000, pg. 201) but that “(if) curriculum reform always tends to re-create an intellectual ideal, ignoring the implicit historical and cultural basis on which this ideal has taken form, it has also been conducted largely without reference to the school system as a social structure within which the ideal has to be realised” (Teese 2000, pg. 6). Lacking such contextualisation the usefulness of these debates is significantly limited in particular to reactive measures rather than proactive ones.

If and when governmental policy documents and other research attempt to contextualise the question of how young people view their educational experience, often their proposed solutions do not bear any practical relevance to this context, as these proposed solutions avoid challenging the contextual structures. Moreover where policy suggestions, e.g. increased funding for particular projects or programs, additional specialist staff etc, are emphasised in an attempt to tackle student attitudes, these are rarely implemented at the school level and at best reflect token acknowledgement of the role of students as independent and thoughtful actors in the learning process. Ultimately, the exigencies of the broader political economic context restrict the possibility of any effective reform at the local level, regardless of how much responsibility as rhetoric is given to local agents and agencies (Welch 1996, pg. 10-14).

Problems of student attitudes cannot be considered in isolation from the context that both produces them and generates potential opposition and possible resolution. The school

itself and every other layer of capitalist social reality generate not only the impetus for self-reproduction, but also the elements of opposition.

Martí writes that

(Che Guevara) distinguished four stages in the internal process of the individual: the initial compulsion, comprehension (understanding), internal necessity and the pleasure of fulfilment (overcoming) (Martí 1999, pg. 44).

In the school, student and teacher both implement existing policy and react against it. In the school community, parent, teacher and citizen do likewise. In society as a whole, entire communities live with but also oppose the constraints of the political economy. Within the complex inter-relation of these oppositions is the germ of fundamental change in student attitudes. If the current discussion on civics and citizenship education was directed at articulating these oppositions it could play an important part in the process of reform.

### **Civics and Citizenship Education**

The search for a definition of citizenship, and the notion of democratic schooling are by no means new ideas in education theory, but rather extensions of earlier themes.<sup>3</sup> However in recent years, literature focusing on the question and definition of “civics and citizenship”, and the role of schools in preparing active future citizens has increased significantly. It has focused on the growing disinterest on the part of youth in political structures and processes, and lack of knowledge about such processes (Print 1995), a widespread mistrust of politicians (Manning and Ryan 2004) and an inability to understand and/or critically reflect on the changing global political and social landscape (Manning 1999). As Holdsworth notes, “it’s a debate that is about young people, but that seldom involves young people.”(Holdsworth 1998, pg. 1)

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<sup>3</sup> As an example, take the issue of rights for students which developed alongside and out of youth involvement in many of the mass social movements of the 60’s and 70’s. See Haubrich, V. F. and M. W. Apple, Eds. (1975). Schooling and the rights of children. Series on Contemporary Educational Issues. Berkeley, McCutchan Publishing Corporation.

The diverse literature on civics and citizenship education, including books, articles, reports, conferences, proposed curriculum frameworks have almost all situated the discussion firmly in the context of the challenges of an increasingly globalised world with an increasing number of tensions and contradictions. The analysis of the actual problem of student alienation, lack of interest etc, is more or less agreed on. There is general agreement that an urgent need to engage our youth in an active participatory democracy exists.

For example *Global Perspectives: A statement on global education for Australia*, released in 2002 as a practical resource on global education for teachers and students (The Global Education Project 2002) defines global education as aiming "... to develop in teachers and students alike an open-mindedness to new thinking about the world and a predisposition to active participation as a member of the global community building a shared future... global education aims to enable and equip young people for global citizenship." (The Global Education Project 2002, pg. 8) The document provides a comprehensive and practical model for a more inclusive, tolerant and critical curriculum which specifically aims to challenge existing prejudice and ignorance. It offers a rounded argument as to the numerous benefits of developing global citizens in the effort to ensure a globally just and sustainable future.

Preskill et al. suggest dialogue as the key to "... reconstruct(ing) our leading institutions so as to build a more humane and manageable future" and assert that "(e)ducational practice must be steeped in dialogue to renew learning and teaching and to fulfil the promise of democratic living." (Preskill, Vermilya and Otero 2000, pg. 46) Dialogue is defined as conversation which can "... generate new knowledge... enhance shared understanding... renew hope... stimulate collective action... (and which) encourages people to solve their problems collaboratively, to see one another as valuable sources of knowledge and experience, and to forge new links with each other." (Preskill, Vermilya et al. 2000, pg. 48)

The question to be asked, is what is the potential of such attempts within the undemocratic educational context outlined earlier in the chapter?

## **Democratic citizenship in an un-democratic classroom?**

There are many examples of those who recognise the disparity between the ideal of democratic schooling and its potential in the educational and broader context of an undemocratic political system. Students and teachers live in a world where tolerance is preached but not practiced, where democracy and equality are not available to all citizens and where supposed civic leaders display dishonesty and vulgar opportunism.

Wilson suggests that

learning about democracy (through class based projects and units) has all the disadvantages of traditional academic learning approaches: it is theoretical rather than applied learning, it is removed from the real life experiences of students, and it results in superficial and short-term learning rather than deep and lifelong learning...Real learning about democracy is achieved by students participating in democracy, and schools need to provide environments which allow experiential learning about democracy and citizenship through student participation in schools (Wilson 2000, pg. 25).

More specifically Beane and Apple assert that it is unlikely that students will “learn” democratic ideals in an undemocratic classroom setting (Beane and Apple 1999). Pearl suggests that the “superficial description of the apparatus of government – the executive, the legislature and the judicial system” and the “standard lack luster accounting of history” which is offered to students in schools is inadequate, and results in students leaving “...school with little enthusiasm for citizen responsibilities.” (Pearl 2000, pg. 5)

Brennan notes that

It is hard to teach students about citizenship if they do not learn about it in the processes of a major social institution. There are some exciting developments in ‘discovering democracy’ and school parliaments – though too often this is more formal than applied to the core processes of schools – and these need to be extended...students need to experience active participation in their classrooms, in

school decision making and in organising their own interchanges as students (Brennan 2000, pg. 8-9).

Ladwig and Gore take this issue further when they ask how effective a democratic classroom is likely or able to be in the context of an undemocratic society (Ladwig and Gore 1998). Increased privatisation and corporate influences in schools is incongruous with democratic ideals according to Giroux.

The advocate of corporate culture no longer views public education in terms of its civic function; rather it is primarily a commercial venture in which the only form of citizenship available for young people is consumerism...reducing public education to the ideological imperatives of the corporate order works against the critical social demands of educating citizens to sustain and develop inclusive democratic identities, relations, and public spheres (Giroux 2000, pg. 85).

Pearl argues that the revitalisation of citizenship will require active engagement in problem solving and rigorous debate in the classroom and practical and cooperative involvement in research and community projects (Pearl 2000).

### **‘Safe’ student participation**

Such contradictions between the genuine aims of an educational outlook and a society which is unable to deliver those key principles to all of its citizens mean that at best *some* good programs can exist in *some* good schools at the initiative of *some* good teachers, rather than a generalised philosophical shift in educational delivery.

As a result, rather than schools enthusiastically seeking to aid the development of critical and active students prepared for active citizenry in later life, student input is generally only sought in ‘safe’ areas within clear boundaries, for example through puppet Student Representative Councils (SRC’s). These bodies, while offering students a chance to collectively and openly discuss school based issues and problems do not at the end of the day have any decision making power with regard curriculum or organisational structures. Despite positive intentions it is questionable whether the advice they offer to school

councils and management teams is genuinely considered, with staff often viewing them as little more than a tool to appease students.

Wierenga, in a very useful report on existing youth participation opportunities in Australia suggests that recurring themes and challenges for young people in decision-making roles include

- Young people are involved in token and ‘decorative’ ways;
- Young people are involved marginally but adults make all the decisions;
- Young people are involved in making ‘decision-less decisions’ where the decisions are limited to decisions that do not really matter;
- Young people make decisions but nothing happens;
- Young people are included in decision-making but the project is under resourced, making action difficult; and
- Youth is transitory: experienced young people become too old to fulfil their ‘youth’ role (Wierenga 2003, pg. 6).

In her broader reflections on youth participation policy and genuine democratic practice Bessant suggests that standard mechanisms offered as vehicles for increased youth participation such as roundtables provide

... a very restricted ‘youth voice’ in policy-making with participation confined to *communication* or *consultation*, rather than actual participation in decision-making processes that has a material effect (Bessant 2004, pg. 399).

Cullingford suggests that

It has recently become more fashionable to assert the rights of children to be heard, but the implications of this right, in terms of responsibility, are rarely taken up. All the demonstrations of the will to include the voices of pupils in school show how limited is the effect when this happens... The fact that we can gather crucial evidence about the reality of schools from paying careful attention to those within them appears only to be acceptable if the views concur with those who have

control. If the views challenge the very nature of schools then they are somehow put aside (Cullingford 2002, pg. 126).

Holdsworth notes that initiatives to involve students in curriculum implementation can

(e)asily devolve into trivial exercises of temporary engagement. Negotiated curriculum processes have concentrated largely on the **what** and **how** of the curriculum: decisions about **what** we will learn, about **how** we will make such decisions, and (in the presence of increasingly rigid frameworks) on **how** we will learn. Little attention has been paid to the larger and more difficult issue of encouraging and supporting student participation in issues of **why** learning something is valuable or the **usefulness** of that learning (Holdsworth 1998, pg. 5).

Moreover and more critically Pearl suggests that the attempt to deceive students into thinking they are being adequately represented has an even greater adverse effect.

Not all participation, even that which purports to be democratic, is educational. There are games played with participation. Students participate in trivial decisions while adult authorities make the important ones. The effect of this charade is to reinforce the idea that only a certain few have the capacity to decide on matters of importance. It is the treatment of students as objects to be manipulated as much as the meaninglessness of the material to be mastered that feeds authoritarianism and produces cynicism (Pearl 2000, pg. 10).

### **Integration or social liberation?**

Essentially, any debate which exists around the form and content of civics education is little more than the re-hashing of long term dilemmas faced by each of the two major historico-philosophical trends in education under the capitalist system. On the one hand there are the liberal and conservative views; including those who are usually genuinely interested in conducting a constructive debate about increasing democracy and engaging our youth in political and social life, but ultimately framed in terms of improving the integration of the student into society; and those less interested in democracy, but attempting to give liberal cover to the primary goal of creating a passive citizenry,

subservient to the needs of the capitalist system (Ponce 1993). On the other hand are the anti-systemic views which promote democracy as empowerment of the student (Freire 1970). If new in any sense, the contemporary discussion reflects the growing reality of the contradiction of education under the capitalist system. While many others do not, Giroux highlights not only the vocabulary of these changes but also their concrete reality.

The war waged against the possibilities of an education wedded to the precepts of a real democracy is not merely ideological. Against the backdrop of reduced funding for public schooling, the call for privatisation, vouchers, cultural uniformity, and choice, there are the often ignored larger social realities of material power and oppression (Giroux 2001, pg. ix).

It is argued that engaging with these issues, the social reality facing students, as part of a struggle for social justice, inclusivity and equity in schooling and indeed in society must be at the core of any genuine civics and citizenship education. It is considered that Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* articulates this and is especially pertinent to the question of civics engagement as it relates to student attitudes to learning.

### **The removal of Freire from Freire**

The strength of the work of Freire, when compared to other critics such as Illich and many contemporaries, is that he not only links the repression of student participation to the oppression of society, but he also emphasises the link between student participation and social liberation (Freire 1970).

This is not simply a political statement by Freire but a philosophical consistency. It is not possible to consider student involvement in schooling outside of a process of social inclusion. Such inclusion is only possible as a struggle against those socio-political structures that restrict participation in the whole human enterprise.

It is this revolutionary aspect of Freire's work which has long been under-emphasised or removed altogether by many progressive educational theorists who claim to be influenced by his work. On this, McLaren is explicit when discussing the removal of the political content and analysis inherent in Freire's writings.

... the figure of Paulo Freire has been domesticated by liberals, progressives, and pseudo-Freireans who have tried incessantly to claim his legacy and teachings... Hence it is necessary to re-possess Freire from those contemporary revisionists who would reduce him to the *grand seigneur* of classroom dialogue and would antiseptically excise the corporeal force of history from his pedagogical practices (McLaren 2000, pg xxii).

Such reformists who wish to

...limit (Freire's) legacy to its contribution to consciousness-raising... (and who are) often victims of a subjectivism that occurs when people verbally denounce social injustice but leave intact the existing structures of society... (Freire was) unwavering in (his) view that education and cultural processes aimed at liberation do not succeed by freeing people from their chains, but by preparing them collectively to free themselves (McLaren 2000, pg. 192-193).

Such a distorted use of Freire's work has the opposite effect, as it is used to "...camouflage existing capitalist social relations under a plethora of eirenic proclamations and classroom strategies. Real socialist alternatives are nowhere to be found..." (McLaren 2000, pg. xxv).

Giroux also reflects on this.

What has been lost in this analysis is Freire's legacy of revolutionary politics. For Freire, *problem solving education* suggests not a methodology but a social theory whose aim is the liberation of individuals and groups as historical subjects through a critical educational process that involves making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical (Giroux 2000, pg. 148).

Herein lies the value of an investigation of schooling in Cuba, a society that considers itself defined by such a struggle. Civics and citizenship education is not an added extra in Cuba. Cuba provides the option of a living experiment in the methodology of learning through engaging in the socio-historical process. This is quite distinct from many of the educational blueprints that various progressive educationalists have popularised, where the model takes

on a certain *independence* from the socio-historical context, rather than being practically and consistently driven by it. According to Guevara, it is only through a concrete process of engagement with the movement that characterises social life, that “truth can be stripped of everything artificial and shown in such form.” (Martí 1999, pg. 81)

### **Educational philosophy, policy and practice in Cuba**

For the sake of clarity this section is divided into two distinct parts. The first attempts to present an overview of ‘what education in Cuba looks like’, drawing on the varied literature available from both within Cuba and outside. The second attempts a more thorough analysis of the current literature available within Cuba with a view to presenting the distinctly Cuban philosophy of pedagogy, as well as some of the issues and debates currently taking place amongst teachers, academics and the community in general.

### **The ‘debate’ on Cuba**

The existing literature written from outside of Cuba, although still relatively scarce, contains many contradictions. This is reflective of the ‘debate’ on Cuba more broadly. In the past authors on Cuba’s education system could perhaps have been placed loosely into two conflicting categories, those who passionately support the Cuban political establishment (MacDonald 1985) and those who aggressively denounce it (De Varona 1992). However the latter category appear to have all but disappeared from recognised academic research discussions, and in the opinion of one report those unequivocally rejecting the Cuban education system in its entirety hold “no significant place” in the literature and are often commentators rather than researchers (Richmond 1990).

It is worth reflecting briefly on why this may be the case. One possibility is that political events in recent years have discredited the traditional, overtly hostile and largely Miami based critics of the Cuban government (for example the case of Elian Gonzalez<sup>4</sup>, and

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<sup>4</sup> Elian Gonzalez was, as a 5 year old boy, at the centre of a bitter dispute between the United States and Cuba, when in 1999 he was found floating off the Florida coast having survived an attempt by boat to reach the United States which his mother and step-father did not. Miami based relatives claimed that he should remain in their custody based on the argument that he would have a better life in the United States. Elian’s father stated that he wanted the boy to return to be with him in Cuba. The case evoked a strong reaction internationally and sparked intense debate about international law as well as the current social and economic situation in Cuba. After a long court battle which reached the heights of the US legal system, the Supreme

growing international opposition to the United States economic blockade of Cuba<sup>5</sup>), and cast doubts on their ability and/or willingness to make objective and rounded arguments. This combined with the broad and persistent recognition of important social and cultural successes achieved by Cuba, appear to be stimulating a genuine interest to know more about Cuba from the perspective of rigorous and factual research.

Certainly one attitude which is prevalent in the majority of existing research outside Cuba, is that further investigative research in schools in Cuba is necessary to draw firm conclusions. This study has attempted to make such a contribution to existing knowledge of the Cuban education system.

### **What does education look like in Cuba?**

The educational achievements of the Cuban people are widely accepted (Watkins 2000; Lindahl 2000; Gasperini 2000; Oficina Regional de Educación Para América Latina y El Caribe, United Nations

Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization 1998; MacDonald 1985) albeit with differing views about the nature of education in a socialist country. (Gasperini 2000, pg. 1-2) offers eleven points as a summary characterizing the strengths of Cuban education. These are worth noting here by way of an introduction.

1. Quality basic education and universal access to primary and secondary school;
2. Comprehensive early childhood education and student health programs (established as part of the commitment to basic education);
3. Complementary educational programs for those outside school – literacy, adult and non-formal education (again as part of the basic education commitment);

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Court rejected all appeals and Elian was returned to Cuba to his father. For more information and an interesting discussion about the Cuban American lobby see Allen, B. (2001-2002). "'Eliated' but empowered: the millennial year retrenchment of Cuban-American politics." Flinders Journal of History and Politics 22: 93-109.

<sup>5</sup>In October last year, for the 13<sup>th</sup> straight year, the United Nations General Assembly voted on a motion to end the four-decade-old economic, commercial and financial embargo imposed by the United States against Cuba, with only the United States, Israel, Palau and the Marshall islands voting against. The total vote was 179 in favour to 4 against, with 1 abstention). For further information see <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/ga10288.doc.htm> These votes (the previous year's vote was 179 in favour, 3 against and 2 abstentions) are taking place in the context of increased trade between Cuba and a number of countries as well as growing social (solidarity) movements internationally, which call for an end to the embargo.

4. Mechanisms to foster community participation in management of schools;
5. Great attention to teachers (extensive pre- and in-service training, high status and morale, incentives, transparent system of accountability, strategies for developing a culture of professionalism, rewards for innovation);
6. Low-cost instructional materials of high quality;
7. Teacher and student initiative in adapting the national curriculum and developing instructional materials locally;
8. Carefully structured competition that enhances the system rather than the individual;
9. Explicit strategies to reach rural students and students with special needs;
10. Strategies to link school and work; and
11. An emphasis on education for social cohesion.

It is also widely recognised that Cuba consistently leads the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean in almost all standard indicators of educational achievement as set by such international agencies as UNESCO and UNICEF. Lutjens notes the following quantitative comparisons

...in 1980 and 1990, educational expenditures as a percentage of GNP were higher in Cuba than in the United States, developing countries as a whole, and the Latin America/Caribbean region. The number of teachers per capita is now the highest in the world (1/42) and the teacher/student ratio is admirable for any developed country and much better than those that are developing. Net primary enrolment 1993-1995 was 99% for both girls and boys, compared to 87% in the region; the 94% of primary students reaching grade 5 in Cuba contrasts sharply with the 74% in the region; and gross secondary enrolments in Cuba were 78% for boys and 82% for girls, compared to 47% and 51% in the region, respectively (Lutjens 2000, pg. 11).

Further findings of the 1998 UNESCO study reported in the Cuban press and cited by Lutjens show that Cuba also led in "...the percentage of students repeating one or more grades; urban-rural gap; books in children's homes; educational level of parents; participation of parents in the school; and pre-school education." (Lutjens 2000, pg. 12)

Nationmaster.com, a website which collates and presents statistical information on most countries, using sources from (among other organisations) UNESCO, provides the following facts about education in Cuba and Australia

- Of the top 100 countries, Cuba is noted as the 15<sup>th</sup> highest spender on education, and Australia the 30<sup>th</sup> (as a percentage of GDP 1990-1999) (Nationmaster.com 2005b)
- Cuba spends the 8<sup>th</sup> highest amount on each secondary school student, as compared to Australia which spends the 90<sup>th</sup> highest amount out of 123 countries internationally (Nationmaster.com 2005)

### **Educational Success against the odds**

Such success is presented as having been achieved against the odds. The current government inherited widespread social inequality which as a poor, developing country it has attempted to address in a comparatively short period of time. Lindahl notes that four educational achievements (the passage of the GI Bill of Rights, desegregation, the Education for All Handicapped Act and public high schools) considered by some in the United States to be the most significant victories of the 21st century were very similar to changes planned for Cuba in the first decade after the revolution (Lindahl 2000). These achievements have been made despite the United States' continued embargo of Cuba which is estimated to have cost the Cuban people US\$65 billion (Lara 1999).

The combination of these social and economic challenges inherited from pre-1959 with more specific political references, form the basis of what the Cuban people refer to as The Special Period.

### **The Special Period**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980's and thus the collapse of 80% of Cuba's trade (Spencer 2000) and the intensification of the United States embargo had a disastrous impact on the Cuban economy (Anderson 2002), most significantly in the loss of 75% of its imports (Castro 1993). The economic and social stringencies born of this situation, a period known in Cuba as The Special Period, required many changes in educational

planning and policy to ensure the central principles of access, quality facilities and resources etc were maintained.

An economic commitment to education remained throughout The Special Period, and continues despite official declaration that The Special Period is over. Between 1991 and 1993, at the most critical point in the economic crisis, educational spending was sustained at “23% of the national budget” and in the year 1999 it was increased by 60 million Cuban pesos “...in order to guarantee increases in food, material supplies, structural repairs and maintenance of the schools, as well as other areas.” (López 1999, pg. 191&202)

Policy changes have generally gone against contemporary global trends. The current focus in educational institutions is on increased de-centralisation, notably flexible curriculum delivery and local alternatives to formal pedagogy.

As an important premise for the recognition of the teacher’s labour, there needs to be an adequate relationship between the centralised structure of direction and the different possible forms of decentralisation that permit the articulation of participatory management, and with levels of decision-making from the base [level] (Robledo 1999, pg. 159).

### **Democratic Participation**

The types of changes and the mechanisms used to implement them point to a commitment to a democratic and inclusive process involving both teachers and students. The Cuban Communist Party-organised discussions in the 1990’s involving 170,000 teachers were an initial step in the process of change and reflect a broader philosophy (Lutjens 2000).

In Cuba education is characterised by its centrality, and relationship to the broader socialist objectives of the country and a commitment to democratic participation at all levels. In the words of Cuban President Fidel Castro a strong emphasis on formal education “... helps raise the general technical, cultural, and political level of society as a whole, a necessary component of the expansion of democracy.” (Castro 1983, pg. 21) Broadly speaking formal education in Cuba consists of “...a complex network of organised activities intended to educate within and outside the schools.” (Lutjens 2000) Cuba’s mass people’s organisations

such as the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR's) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) organise a range of educational activities for their membership and also impact on developments within schools.

The centrality of mass citizen's organisations to Cuban educational planning and implementation of policy is also characteristic of some other (previously) socialist orientated countries, for example Nicaragua (Arnove 1981). In Cuba there is a strong tradition of involvement in mass organisations for students with membership almost universal though not compulsory in

- The Organised Pioneer movement of José Martí (OPJM, or los Pioneros) – a mass primary and early secondary school aged children's organisation “deeply integrated with daily life in schools” involving students from grade 1 through Year 9 (Lutjens 2000, pg. 4),
- The Federación de Estudiantes de Enseñanza Media (FEEM) a mass secondary students organisation for upper secondary school students, and
- The Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios (FEU) involving University students.

Many of the specific and practical suggestions made by Pearl and other proponents of the democratic classroom, and a genuine civics and citizenship focus in schools, are an established aspect of life in Cuba. The majority of Cuban young people are actively involved in their local communities as individuals and within their student organisations. For example student organisations along with the other mass people's organisations in Cuba are involved in the nomination and selection of candidates to the provincial and municipal assembly elections (August 1999). Generally a specific commitment to involving young people in public life is evident, as one example in 1993, 25-year-old Enith Alerm Prieto joined Cuba's Council of State (Lutjens 2000, pg. 9). Cuba's schoolteachers are also widely involved in local community activities (Robledo 1999).

Student organisations participate in Cuba at both the local, school and classroom, and national level. They comprise a complex of independent and sometimes contradictory organisations, representing the specificities of the local as well as the generalised, national

political viewpoints of self-organised students through such organisations as the FEEM and the Pioneros (Federación de Estudiantes de la Enseñanza Media 2002).

### **Perfeccionamiento Continuo**

Perfeccionamiento Continuo is the educational reform program in Cuba which began in 1986 in the context of The Special Period, and continues today. Students in Cuba, through their involvement in mass student organisations play an important and officially recognised role in the formation of policy such as Perfeccionamiento Continuo. Lutjens notes that

In The Special Period, official attention to youth recognises – and relies on – their organised activities, their congresses, and their criticisms... The problems raised in the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the FEEM...were formally associated with the beginning of Perfeccionamiento Continuo...As discussions leading to the First Congress of the Pioneros occurred, the Centre for the Study of Youth investigated the views of children, adult leaders, and parents... The complaints and criticisms channelled through organised participation clearly fall within the boundaries of official policy (Lutjens 2000, pg. 9).

The main objectives of Perfeccionamiento Continuo reflect both the long-standing principles of education in the socialist context and the changing nature of life under The Special Period. They include an end to authoritarian classrooms and the formalistic transmission of knowledge, with an “...emphasis on active and participatory learning, to be facilitated with creative teaching methods” (Lutjens 2000, pg. 6); the decentralisation of educational administration, and greater autonomy for schools; and an emphasis on the ideological and political role of education, with more of a focus on Cuban history and civic education. Maintaining a bottom up approach to education policy is of central concern. In 1991 under a new minister of education, 3000 local, provincial and national administrators returned to classroom teaching positions in an effort to maintain an understanding of local and grass roots issues at the governmental level. Further, while the Ministry of Education has to some extent always retained central direction of the curriculum, pedagogy and standard, all local administration and implementation of decisions takes place after extensive discussion with all involved parties and ultimately rests with the local agency of *poder popular*, or peoples’ power (local popularly elected committees in each province). This

includes pedagogical practice and extends to questions of resources and the hiring of teaching and administrative staff (Harnecker 1980).

Perfeccionamiento Continuo also emphasises productive work, striving to maximise efficient use of scarce resources and materials and improve the integration of work with academic life. In 1982 “(a)ll students at junior and senior high schools in the countryside and 95 percent of those in urban areas, (took) part in productive work.” (Castro 1982) A focus on scientific research is also a priority within the context of the needs and aspirations of the ongoing socialist tasks (Lutjens 2000).

### **Cuban pedagogy today - linking theory with practice**

Both theory and practice in Cuban pedagogy have developed in dialogue and debate with global intellectual trends and historically tested practice. There is no question of negating alternatives by non-recognition.

This has not prevented Cuba from establishing a coherent national and unified education system. The culture of permanent research and debate strengthens the confidence of each local actor in the key elements of the system and generates local initiative. In turn local development renovates the national system and tests its theoretical premises. This process is firmly grounded in the national, specific identity of the Cuban revolutionary process, which even at the height of economic dependence on the Soviet bloc maintained its philosophical independence and integrity. Cuban pedagogy studied the Soviet experience critically. While it drew on the collectivist methods of Soviet education it did not accept the Stalinification that evolved through that tradition. Cuban collectivism in pedagogy is not the collectivism of control (see (Makarenko 1955), but rather the collectivism of social action (Guevara 2003, pg. 212-228).

This open-system is philosophically founded. Education is understood for its social value, not its market value (Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000). This is not without problems especially given the economic subjugation of Cuban society to the imperatives of the global market economy and US political aggression. These constraints are understood by the Cuban government and influential in policy decisions. It is recognised that adopting an isolationist stance from global society would be disastrous for a dependent economy,

resulting in a reproduction of its own existing inequalities and socio-cultural prejudices (Muruga, Gutiérrez, Mendoza and Izquierdo 1998).

The social foundation of Cuban education cannot be understood as the narrowly conceived “existing Cuban socialism”, but the human emancipatory enterprise itself. Education is considered as the arena in which the subject can become conscious of their abilities to influence society and history, both by advancing in technological know-how and inventiveness and by developing their intellectual capacities as social interpreters and protagonists (Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000).

This educational foundation presumes student-centred learning and teacher-student-citizen-centred education policy development and results in a constant and responsive cycle of action research, reform and debate through active participation. It should be of great interest to policy-makers and educationalists in Australia and elsewhere who seek to break out of the existing practice of waiting until problems become too large to ignore and then considering ways to improve them for future, not existing generations of students. It is hoped that this study is able to make a worthwhile contribution to such efforts.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Methodology**

Understanding student attitudes to schooling requires a contextual approach that takes account of every layer of the student experience – principally, the social (global and local), the school community and the individual. This research explored these layers of experience and the inter-relations and dynamics of their influences within the framework of a collaborative case study of Australian and Cuban students.

Given the intention to involve students actively in all aspects of the research, considerable thought was required when formulating a methodological approach, particularly in the area of analysis. Whilst informed in part by a range of research methodologies, the collaborative nature of this study and the intended relationship between the researcher and the students involved, necessitated the development of a new methodology. A form of collaborative social research, which emphasises collaboration at every stage, emerged as a useful structure.

### **Collaborative Social Research**

This study sought to maximise the active involvement of students in all areas of the research, and in doing so challenge the traditional notion of the researcher and the researched. Thus a methodology that emphasises inclusiveness and collaboration was required. The chosen design involved a range of techniques and methods for both data collection and analysis, and was influenced by a range of different research praxis. The collaborative social research approach included the use of quantitative methods for demographic data, but is fundamentally an example of qualitative inquiry. It draws widely on the fields of action research to achieve the goals of inclusiveness and collaboration.

## Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research have their own characteristics based on different purposes and paradigms underlying the research (Wiersma 2000, pg. 15).

The temptation to rigidly counter pose qualitative and quantitative methods in educational research in and of itself is not useful. Rather the selection of a methodology must be based on a concise recognition of the connectedness between methodology and the objectives and philosophical foundations of the particular study. A compatibility between the objectives of the research and the possibilities of achieving these using a particular methodological approach must be ensured.

In outlining the different characteristics of each method, Merriam demonstrates how the choice of a qualitative or quantitative approach shapes each and every aspect of the research process. While she warns against setting up "...an artificial dichotomy between the two types..." (Merriam 1998, pg. 8) of research, and recognises that in practice differences between the two are less rigid, her table is a useful summary.

**Figure 1. Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Research**

<i>Points of Comparison</i>	<i>Qualitative Research</i>	<i>Quantitative Research</i>
Focus of Research	Quality (nature, essence)	Quantity (how much, how many)
Philosophical roots	Phenomenology, symbolic interactionism	Positivism, logical empiricism
Associated phrases	Fieldwork, ethnographic, naturalistic, grounded, constructivist	Experimental, empirical, statistical
Goal of investigation	Understanding, description, discovery, meaning, hypothesis generating	Prediction, control, description, confirmation, hypothesis testing
Design characteristics	Flexible, evolving, emergent	Predetermined, structured
Sample	Small, nonrandom, purposeful, theoretical	Large, random, representative
Data Collection	Researcher as primary instrument, interviews, observations, documents	Inanimate instruments (scales, tests, surveys, questionnaires, computers)
Mode of analysis	Inductive (by researcher)	Deductive (by statistical methods)
Findings	Comprehensive, holistic, expansive, richly descriptive	Precise, numerical

(Merriam 1998, pg. 9)

The objectives of this study required a qualitative approach. While it may not fall entirely under one of the 5 types outlined by Merriam it draws on the techniques of an ethnographical approach in that it “(f)ocuses on society and culture” and “(u)ncovers and describes beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behaviour of a group.” (Merriam 1998, pg. 12) Furthermore the intention is to present a “socio-cultural interpretation of the data.” (Merriam 1998, pg. 14)

This study has sought to represent the views of the subjects as accurately as possible. It takes as its starting point the need to contextualise the concept of student attitudes to learning, with the aim of understanding the complex set of social factors which influence and shape these attitudes. The data collection took place in the natural setting and has been analysed interpretatively and descriptively (Bogdan and Biklen 1992), employing an inductive approach to data analysis, demonstrating the influence of grounded theory (Hutchinson 1990).

It is asserted that a quantitative approach would not have enabled the objectives of this study to be realised, despite the fact that various studies with similar aims employ such methods.

### **Quantitative methods in studies of student attitudes to learning**

Although the employment of quantitative methods in studies researching student attitudes is widespread, for example (Munro 1999; Ainley, Batten et al. 1998), it is argued that such an approach in practice can create significant barriers in achieving trustworthy and meaningful research outcomes. Quantitative studies involving researcher directed and interpreted data can lead to assumptions being made with little questioning of their validity. It can be difficult for this type of data to capture the likely intervention of social and cultural expectations on student data. Connell et al touch on this in the appendix to *Making the Difference*, a section which reflects on method and ultimately suggests the need for more collaborative social research (Connell, Ashenden et al. 1982). Furthermore, Métais asserts that when comparing educational systems, an “...undue reliance on quantitative studies is inappropriate (because) ... such research often ignores the context that goes a long way to explain the success or failure of specific teaching and learning approaches.” Métais cited in (Watson 2001, pg. 197)

Based on this analysis, this study employed qualitative methods to collect the primary data. However, in recognition of the important role that quantitative data can play within or alongside qualitative research in suggesting trends and providing general information about subjects (Bogdan and Biklen 1992) a questionnaire was included (refer to Appendix 1). This quantitative aspect of the study provided demographic information about the participants and their contexts, e.g. student ages, community location (by post code for example), the number of people in the family and so on. With regard the comparative aspect of the study, Hopkins notes the usefulness of questionnaires in that they provide direct comparison, quantifiable data and are easy to administer (Hopkins 1993).

The ACER investigation into *The Quality of School Life* presents a different example of the usefulness of using a combination of methods. While based on quantitative data, interviews were conducted with a sample of students during a subsequent case study component of the research, to "...obtain direct feedback from the subjects... on possible misinterpretations or ambiguities in the questionnaire items." (Batten and Girling-Butcher 1981, pg. 53) On the basis of these interviews the questionnaire was modified in several ways, to minimise the confusion and ambiguity which was shown to have occurred (Williams and Batten 1981).

### **Action Research**

Despite continued claims to the contrary, all research has an ideological basis. The very nature of inquiry necessitates in the first instance, a belief in or of something (Griffiths 1998). Increasingly, amongst those engaged in qualitative research, it is asserted that "...enquiry cannot but be partisan: and that it should not pretend to be otherwise. What is required... is that research be explicitly partisan – in the service of social transformation, equality (and) democracy..." (Hammersley 2000, pg. 189)

If Action Research involves "...the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change" (Bogdan and Biklen 1992, pg. 223) and is a participatory, practical, collaborative, emancipatory, critical, reflexive and dialectical social process (Kemmis and Wilkinson 1998, pg. 23-24), then this study was an action research project. In this case one which sought, in the educational context, to "... (identify) contradictions,

which, in turn, help to locate spaces for ethically defensible, politically strategic action.” (Noffke 1995, pg. 5) Moreover, if Participatory Action Research (PAR) is “...based on (a) liberating understanding of the nature of inquiry” (Smith, Willms et al. 1997, pg. 7) then this was a form of PAR. Perhaps it strayed from Action Research in that the students themselves were not reflecting on their own practice, and yet its aim to further engage students in the process of their own education was fundamentally action driven.

Central to this study was its intent to challenge the notion of students as passive agents or receivers in the educational process, and in doing so, to create an opportunity for students themselves to refute the myths that they are incapable of making a valid contribution. Although the methodology developed from this starting point, it responded to a number of influencing factors throughout the unfolding research process. These factors included time constraints first and foremost, but also the involvement of students (in Victoria, not the case in Cuba) who had limited experience with genuine inquiry relating to their schooling, and limited analytical skills in the context of achieving a generalisable practical outcome. There were also difficulties gaining adequate support for the research process in the Victorian school. Such factors necessitated some aspects of the research being initiated and directed by the researcher. While at this point the study diverged from Participatory Action Research, the methodology on the whole enabled students to be collaborators in most aspects of the research.

Despite these limitations, the philosophy of The Students as Action Researchers (SAR) model - that there is an implicit strength in involving students in research, is shared.

...participating with students as co-researchers is an expression of trust and respect for their ability to find creative solutions to their current life problems as well as an opportunity for them to nurture this ability (Atweh, Christensen and Dornan 1998, pg. 115).

### **Professional Development and Action Research in Cuba**

Action research in education is established practice in Cuba. This is in part an obvious and inevitable outcome of an environment in which students, teachers and education academics collaborate regularly, and in which the hierarchy of ideas is by and large broken down

(Reyes and Pairoi 2001). However it is also the philosophical approach to change in such institutions (as the education system) which fosters a culture of action research (Gasparini 2000). Here the ideas of Che Guevara have influenced Cuban practice significantly. Guevara argued vehemently against the separation of theory and practice, and against the dangers of bureaucratism (Guevara 2003, pg. 178-183). His theories were built upon those of José Martí, who suggested that those who are carrying out the work must be those at the centre of discussions for change (Martí 1999). Of course these ideas are firmly rooted in Marx's writing, but Guevara has elaborated the theory in the practical context of Cuba.

### **Collaborative Social Research Design and Scope**

A fusion of the different perspectives outlined above, combined with a collaborative analysis approach lead to the methodological framework for this study. This collaborative social research framework has provided a coherent and trustworthy structure relevant to this context. Given the nature of this research however, these ideas provided a starting point for an unfolding and inductive process, involving all participants rather than a prescribed and detailed manifesto. In the developing stages of this research, the research method of Kruger et al (Kruger, Cherednichenko, Hooley and Moore 2001) was particularly useful.

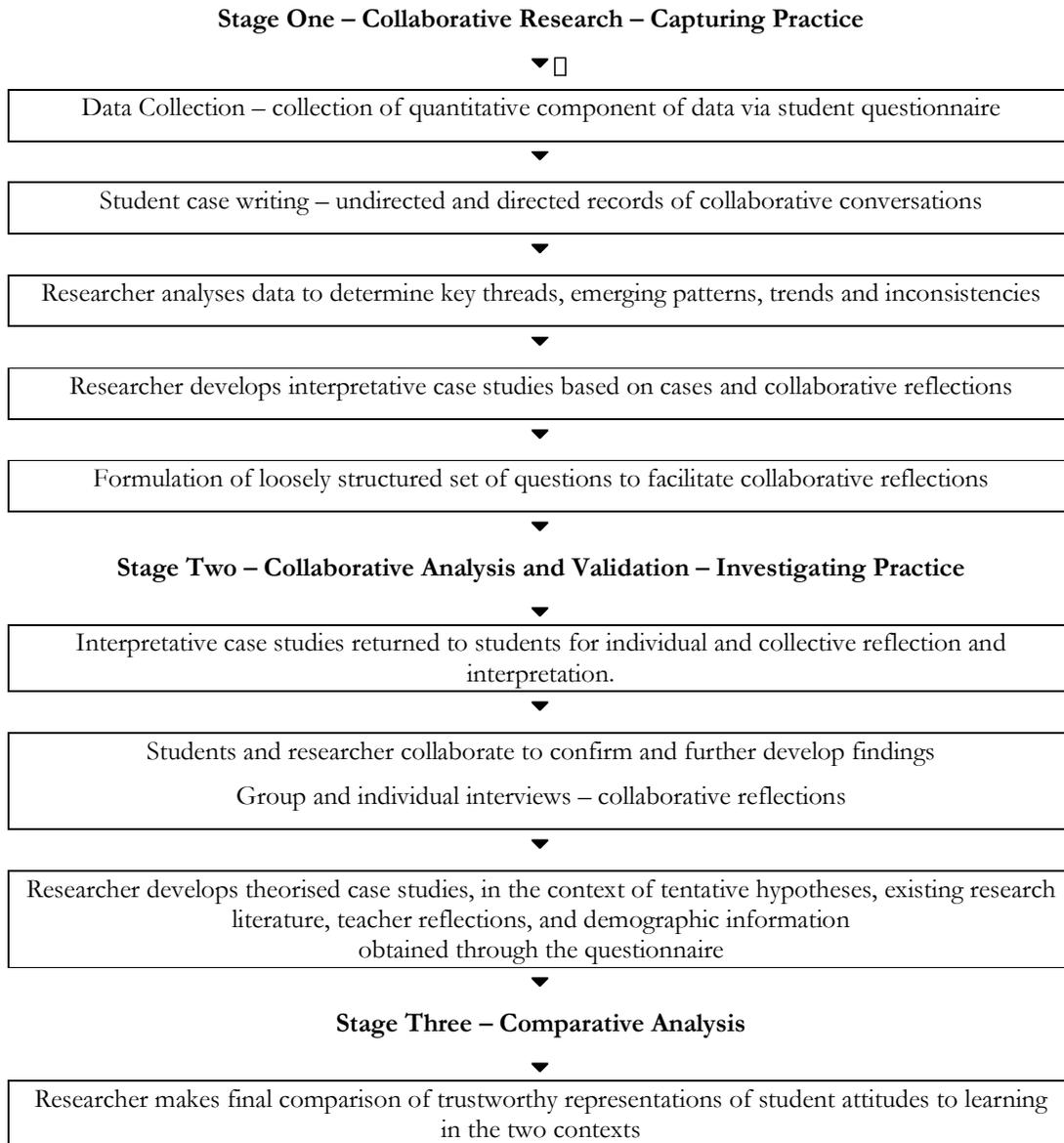
The study involved the collection of directed and open-ended written cases of the social practices of learning and teaching from the perspective of 20 Year 10 Melbourne West College<sup>6</sup> (MWC) students in Victoria and 20 similar aged secondary students in Vedado Secondary College (VSC) in Vedado, Havana. Given the researcher's experiences as a member of staff, MWC was an obvious choice, providing ease of access and an established rapport with staff and students, and is considered to be more or less representative of a typical Western suburbs state secondary school in Melbourne. VSC was selected with the assistance of Rosa María Másson Cruz, a senior lecturer at the pedagogical sciences faculty of the University of Enrique José Varona, Havana, who acted as a 'tutor' throughout the research process in Cuba – assisting with the collection of written materials, liaison with the Department of Education and with the teaching staff of VSC. It is considered that VSC is

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<sup>6</sup> The names of both schools used here are pseudonyms, to protect anonymity.

representative of a typical middle-secondary school in Havana, a claim which undoubtedly rings more true in the Cuban context of a national, and uniform education system.

**Figure 2. Research Design**



## **Stage One: Collaborative Research – Capturing Practice**

### **Organisational Questions**

Significant variables in the collection of cases in each country were anticipated. Preliminary meetings with students were held in each country, as well as written correspondence with parents of the MWC students, teaching staff and students. The introductory sessions explained the process and purpose of the study and the expectations of participation. Any questions the students had were answered and the process of building a positive researcher/participant relationship began. The exact number of sessions held with students in each country differed depending on outcomes of the negotiation process, and were influenced as the research itself unfolded.

The case writing process began once those students interested in voluntary participation had been fully briefed on the purpose, nature and expectations of the study - and completed the quantitative aspect of the study, the questionnaire. At all times the process was guided by an acute awareness of the potential social barriers (i.e. class, race, gender etc.) which could prohibit confident and open participation in the research process (Griffiths 1998).

The limited sample of 20 students in each location was manageable and reflective of the constraints of the study. While it is important to note the limitations of a small sample, it is considered that it was sufficient to enable the fulfillment of the objectives of the study in generating both specific-local and generalisable findings, able to influence and contribute to the task of improving student attitudes to learning.

The samples were neither randomly nor purposefully chosen. Students were approached by the researcher directly at MWC, and by the participating teacher at VSC and asked to volunteer as participants in the study. Purposeful sampling was originally considered as an answer to a concern regarding the breadth of student volunteers, or their representativeness of the broader student population. Would voluntary participation lead to a less diverse group with only the most engaged students electing to be involved? However such a method would have contradicted the voluntary nature of participation. Further, the question of the types of students who volunteered to participate was in and of itself, an

interesting reflection on the themes addressed within the study. Ultimately, such concerns appeared to be unfounded with possible reasons for this explored in chapters 4 and 5.

The initial two questions to be answered through case writing were formulated at the first group meeting with the MWC students, from a collective brainstorm about school and learning. Once the broad intentions of the study had been explained, the central aim of uncovering student attitudes from the students themselves was set in train by asking them what they thought was most important to research in terms of learning and schooling, by way of a brainstorm. This generated broad and lively dialogue about the main themes the students felt would/should be covered in such a study. Although covering a wide range of specific topics and issues, the comments were broadly, either a) criticisms of school and descriptions of negative learning experiences, or b) aspirations and ideas about improvements, in other words a wish list for a perfect learning situation. The content of these initial group meetings constituted the first data collected, and analysis of this data, combined with the analysis of the cases themselves formed the early basis of the interpretative cases.

Following the brainstorm, although the students themselves were unable to respond to a call to formulate two questions from the discussion, once the researcher suggested the existence of two broad categories, they replied with the following questions, which in turn constituted the first two cases.

**Case Question 1.** What makes a positive learning environment for you? Describe what elements make your learning experience positive. What interferes with your learning?

**Case Question 2.** Describe your ideal school. What would schools need to have, or need to be/look like to provide the perfect learning environment?

The Cuban students then also answered these two cases. It was felt that ensuring comparability by getting both sets of students to respond to the same questions, was more important than a deviation from attempts to ensure student-driven research throughout the project at this point. Moreover, although a similar brainstorm process occurred at the first group meeting with VSC, the responses were varying and not so easily categorised. This would have made it more difficult to develop two specific case questions in limited time.

Finally, the two case questions were relevant to the broad issues and themes raised by the VSC students and fulfilled the purpose of drawing out an initial picture of their attitudes towards their learning and schooling.

### **Case Writing**

The decision to employ case writing as the primary data collection tool was based on the belief that cases can “provide a significant insider view of ... learning, rather than the traditional outsider perspective on the practice (and/or responses) of others”, and that further “...the narrative form of case writing increases the capability of depicting organisational and socio-cultural contexts and influences on practice (and learning).” (Kruger, Cherednichenko et al. 2001, pg. 169-170) Moreover, as Stokes and Tyler note “(c)ase writing depends on and in fact will not work without a commitment from all those involved in the research. As a consequence of this there is less danger of assumptions and generalisations being made about the participants. They have the opportunity to express their own view of the world.” (Stokes and Tyler 1997)

The case-writing form of investigation was considered a viable means by which to explore the way students perceive the many layers of influence on their learning – society and school. Student reflections were seen as critical raw-data for the development of any theoretical generalisations and conclusions. Case writing is considered “...a form of Action Research that is collaborative in nature.” (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997, pg. 14) In initiating the inquiry, the use of written cases as the introductory source of data enabled the students themselves to direct the focus of the research, through their perceptions on what was required in a study of student attitudes to schooling. The subsequent collective reflection through interviews (collaborative and reflexive discussions) and the interpretative cases developed from the initial cases, enabled students to develop their ideas throughout the process.

### **Role of the University Researcher**

In the context of a Collaborative Social Research approach, a clear definition of the role of the University Researcher was critical. That said, aspects of this relationship became clearer through the course of the inductive research process. Gitlin refers to dialogue as an aspect

of the educative research method, central to ensuring a shift from researcher dominant methods, “(d)ialogue does not pit one actor against another but rather enables participants to work together to understand the subject being discussed.” (Gitlin 1990, pg. 447-448) The methodology employed fosters an appreciation of and respect for the opinions and contributions of all those involved in the research.

Although he is speaking of practitioner research, Gitlin’s arguments for a change in the perception of the relationship between researcher and subject are equally applicable to, and pertinent for collaborative social research involving students.

...researchers must engage in dialogue with practitioners at both the level of question-posing and the interpretation of the findings...The “truthfulness” of the data can no longer be understood as something extracted by an individual armed with a set of research procedures, but rather as a mutual process between researcher and subject, that recognises the value of practical knowledge, theoretical inquiry, and systematic examinations. The researchers’ knowledge is not assumed to be more legitimate than the subjects’, nor is their role one of helping the needy other. Rather, the researcher and subject attempt to come to a mutual understanding based on their own strongly articulated positions (Gitlin 1990, pg. 446).

As outlined earlier, some aspects of the research did rely on the researcher to direct the process. However the clear perception of the role of the researcher, as well as stage two of the research ensured that this did not result in the outcomes being researcher directed.

Of importance with regard the role of the researcher in the Cuban context was the question of language skills. While the achievement of literary competency in the Spanish language was an integrated aspect of the preparation for the research, there remained the possibility for limitations and misunderstandings arising from the research being conducted in a non-native language. To minimise this the research was supported by interpreter services.

### **Limitations of case data**

If “(a) case is a concise description by the practitioner of a single teaching or learning incident, containing sufficient material to convey the essential aspects of the incident and some brief reflective comment” (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997) then it became clear early in the research process that the student cases alone were not likely to offer such sufficient reflection. The cases posed issues, thoughts, problems and questions in a generalised sense but lacked the personalised reflection required to begin to understand each students’ perceptions of such themes.

Such potential limitations are discussed in *Teachers Write* (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997) in the context of Action Research involving teachers. It is noted that teachers are likely to have little experience with such an approach, despite working collaboratively in many settings in their work, and that an approach which is sensitive to this and which aims to foster the development of such skills is required (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997, pg. 14-16). These assertions are certainly as applicable to students, if not more so, and the emphasis on building relationships which “...have at their heart, help, support, trust, openness and a commitment to valuing people as individuals and valuing the group to which people belong” (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997, pg. 16), is critical in research involving students.

The cases students wrote were in most instances not complete stories, but more open-ended thoughts, which reflected a difficulty for them to be more specific. As a result, the open-ended cases proved more useful than the specific, directed ones. Although discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, one influential factor here was that the brief period of time available to explain the case writing process to the students, created the space for confusion around the point or purpose of the exercise.

In response, the use of open-ended interviewing was expanded to enable students to further develop their initial ideas and collaborate in the attempt at generalisation. This represented a shift in methodological approach. Originally it was assumed that the cases themselves would be built upon and expanded, more cases would be collected as part of and in response to the emerging trends and themes and that students would play an even more direct role in the development of interpretative cases. Although explained in greater

detail in chapters 4 and 5, it is necessary to note here that this methodological shift is considered to be largely motivated by objective constraints. Dexter, cited in Merriam asserts that “Interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when... it will get better data or more data at less cost than other tactics!” (Merriam 1998) Crudely speaking there was neither enough time in general, in both Vedado and Melbourne to implement the preferred model, or enough support for the research in the MWC setting. It is suggested that these factors, rather than an inherent inability of the students to grasp the concept of case writing influenced the outcomes of the student cases and the subsequent methodological shift.

In any case, a range of questions was raised about the possibilities for genuine collaborative analysis in collaborative social research involving students. Others have suggested that there is a more generalised need to develop clearer methodological models for collaborative analysis in action research projects (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger and O'Rourke 2001). It is considered that this study has highlighted the potential for collaborative analysis which exists, as well as the need for careful methodological consideration in the context of objective structural barriers.

The methodology employed (the expansion of the use of interviews) remained firmly within the philosophical framework of the study and ultimately contributed positively to the developing collaborative social research model. In preparing for these collaborative discussions, a loosely structured set of questions was designed to facilitate a free-flowing exchange of ideas between the researcher and participant. These questions provided the scaffolding for interviews which enabled a collaborative confirmation of the issues and questions arising from the initial cases and group meetings, and the development of the interpretative cases. This is one concrete example of how the analysis of data was an ongoing process intertwined with the data collection process (Merriam 1998).

### **Interpretative Cases**

The process used to develop interpretative cases drew heavily from Cherednichenko et al (2001). In the first instance it involved analysing the data generated from the initial collaborative discussions and the cases to identify key threads of experience, emerging

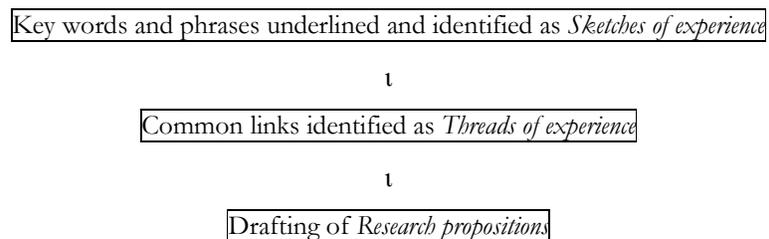
patterns in the attitudes expressed and other key issues as illuminated by the students' responses. The following questions were asked.

Is there any explicit theory, opinion, interpretation being described?

What is/are the author's main message/s?

These questions were answered, by recording the following information based on a model employed by Cherednichenko et al (2001).

### Figure 3. Sketch, Thread and Practice



Each case was analysed with key words or phrases identified, as *sketches of experience* or summaries; patterns were identified between the types of observations or points being made, and recognised as *threads of experience*; and from these initial *research propositions* were developed. An example of this process is included above as Figure 4.

Given that such a process is unavoidably influenced by the personal perspectives and approach of the researcher, certain and well clarified steps were taken as part of a carefully articulated process to ensure that this did not mean a lack of validity. In ensuring that the sketches and threads lead to research propositions which remain true to the original intention of the author, Cherednichenko et al (2001) suggest the following points.

- those ideas which have influenced the context and the conduct of the research are clearly articulated
- the sketch and the case tell the same story
- the sketch rings true

- alternative sketch constructions are considered
- the sketch respects the intentions of the original case
- similarities and distinctions are identified between associated cases and commentaries

**Figure 4. Example of Sketch, thread and proposition**

MWC 7		
Descriptive Statement – The student was asked to describe their perfect school.		
Sketch of Practice	Thread of Practice	Research propositions
School is sometimes pretty stupid. I think some of the stuff we learn there is bull.	Student thinking about curriculum.	The curriculum is not considered relevant to students.
...school would be much better if the classes were smaller like 10 people in a class, then that way the teachers would be able to help us more...	Student identifies problem. Student thinking about learning environment.	There is not enough student-teacher time in schools. Students think about their own learning and have solutions for improving their learning environment. Students are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity.
At lunchtime and recess we are so bored, there is nothing to do.	Student thinking about school environment.	The timetable is not 'adolescent friendly'. Students needs are not met by school.
Our school recently got like over a million dollars and they are spending it on repairing the school, not on us.	Student considers power relations in schools.	Students recognise others as having decision-making power, not students. Decisions are not made in students' interest.

The sketches and threads of experience were compiled to develop a trustworthy interpretation of the cases' key message/s. An attempt to write them in the language of the students was made, in many cases actual phrases within the cases were included. The completed cases were then returned to students for collaborative confirmation and development of the research propositions. This took place in the Australian context, with students individually, often via email and instant messaging services, and in the Cuban setting with group interviews. The research propositions themselves were not revealed to the student participants at this point, through concerns that they might influence them and/or suggest a preferred outcome by the researcher. Rather, the students were asked to comment on and contribute further to the interpretative cases through the interview process, ultimately validating the research propositions through the collaborative process as it developed.

The MWC and VSC Interpretative Cases are included as appendices 2 and 3 respectively.

### **Stage Two: Collaborative Analysis and Theorising in each location**

The students' responses to the interpretative cases constitute the beginning of the collaborative analysis stage of the research.

Fundamental in determining the most appropriate method of analysis, was the conviction that students' opinions of their own education, are in and of themselves "valid". As this is rare in educational research, this immediately necessitated an innovative approach. The claim is often made that students' views are inherently subjective, under-developed and therefore problematic when pursuing validity, eg. (Hopkins 1993). This study attempted to ensure that the quest for research validity did not lead to the perhaps all too customary researcher interpretation or the clouding of students' original thoughts and perspectives. The central aim was to represent the original meaning of the students' own contributions as truthfully as possible. In this context, a collaborative analysis and theorizing approach, combined with the triangulation of theorised data lead to a trustworthy representation of the students' attitudes.

In one of the most significant studies researching student attitudes in Australia, Connell et al discuss the usefulness and relevance of returning to students during the analysis process

(Connell, Ashenden et al. 1982, pg. 32). The *Making the Difference* experience led the research team to strongly recommend returning to the researched as part of the analytic process as standard procedure.

It is a severe test of whether the researcher's ideas do make good sense to the people who, after all, know most about the situations being researched... The report-back sessions showed repeatedly how critical discussions of that experience could enable, could validate peoples' own ideas rather than undercut them (Connell, Ashenden et al. 1982, pg. 208).

Grundy agrees in her criteria for ensuring validity and trustworthiness in action research (Grundy 1995). Gitlin asserts that it is not enough to assume that the use of a qualitative methodological approach in and of itself will lead to a more accurate representation of data. In discussing the possibilities for practitioner-researcher research he argues for a collaborative approach to analysis, which recognises the value in combining perspectives and experiences to reach a mutual understanding of research findings (Gitlin 1990). First and foremost it was expected that a collaborative analysis approach would stimulate a greater understanding of the issues from all involved (Christensen and Atweh 1998).

In its attempts to ensure validity of outcomes, this study drew on Kruger et al (2001) to develop four criteria for achieving trustworthiness.

- To remain true to the intention of the student author,
- To be clear about process and other influencing factors,
- To consider alternatives,
- To look at both positive and negative relationships to hypotheses and prepositions.

Achieving these required transparency at every stage of the process, and it is suggested that the Collaborative Social Research methodology enabled and indeed ensured this.

## **Collaborative Reflection - Investigating Practice**

Interviews can be used to “...gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world.”

(Bogdan and Biklen 1992) They “...augment formal observations and serve to clarify the meanings participants attribute to a given situation...(and they) help the researcher see situations through the eyes of the participants.” (Hutchinson 1990)

In the framework of collaborative social research, the use of open-ended interviews was coherent with both the process of data collection and the analysis process. Several factors were taken into account in conducting the interviews. In the first instance, a naturalistic style was adopted, with a view to minimizing observer effect and maximizing the likelihood of participants feeling free and comfortable to express their opinions (Bogdan and Biklen 1992). Certainly any evidence of observer effect which appeared to remain despite these attempts, is in and of itself interesting from the point of view of this comparative study. The interviews were also approached as a collaborative and two-way process – an exchange of ideas and reflections, rather than a conversation between an interviewer and a subject. While a set of questions was formulated based on the interpretative cases (included here as Appendix 4), these provided a stimulus and loose framework for discussion rather than a prescribed schedule. This enabled the interviews to be fluent, dynamic and responsive to the students themselves, ensuring that the research continued to be largely student-directed.

The interview process also drew on the Western Melbourne Roundtable’s notion of problem solving questions, in that they sought “...further clarification of the problem (fact seeking) and, secondly, allow(ed) the subject to suggest their own solutions (opinion seeking).” (Western Melbourne Roundtable 1997)

At all times, the researcher was aware of the potential influence of power relations in the interview setting. Indeed the breaking-down of the traditional notion of researcher and researched, and in this case (especially with the students of MWC) the notion of teacher and student was considered a critical aspect of the methodological approach. Beyond this fundamental perspective, there was also an awareness of the power relations between the male and female student participants and a conscious effort to facilitate an environment

where all voices could be heard. Finally, the question of expectations and trust were considered and attempts made throughout the process to adequately explain to participants the objectives of the interviews within the overall research, in particular their role and rights/status as co-researchers.

Above and beyond these considerations and the different issues which arose from them in each setting, was the important difference in the researcher-participant relationship between the two contexts. Whilst there was an established rapport, based on trust and mutual respect between the researcher and students at MWC, there was no existing relationship between the researcher and students at VSC. This, combined with the inevitable complications of language and culture lead to differences in the process of explanation, and different approaches to the development of understanding with regard the research process. Interestingly the differences, although present, proved less significant than expected with regards the research outcomes. This is explained in more detail in chapters 4 and 5.

### **Theorised Case Studies**

The theorised case studies evolved as part of the collaborative analysis stage of the research, based on the constant analysis and codification of data using a range of qualitative methods. It is considered that although students were not directly involved in the final drafting of the theorised cases, the preceding stages in the research ensured that the findings were based on trustworthy representations of students' attitudes. Findings were constantly verified through peer review, the ongoing literature review, and a process of triangulation involving a diverse range of data and data sources which included;

- A research journal, maintained throughout the entire process as a record of thought processes, ongoing reflection, practical tasks, questions, contact with other people and organisations, and a chronological record of fieldwork,
- A record of all correspondence between the researcher, colleagues and participants, including comments, ideas and questions,
- Interviews with the participating teacher at VSC and the research colleague at the Pedagogical University of Enrique Jose Verona,

- More detailed fieldnotes, both descriptive and reflective, pertaining to the physical and social school environment in each country,
- The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires.

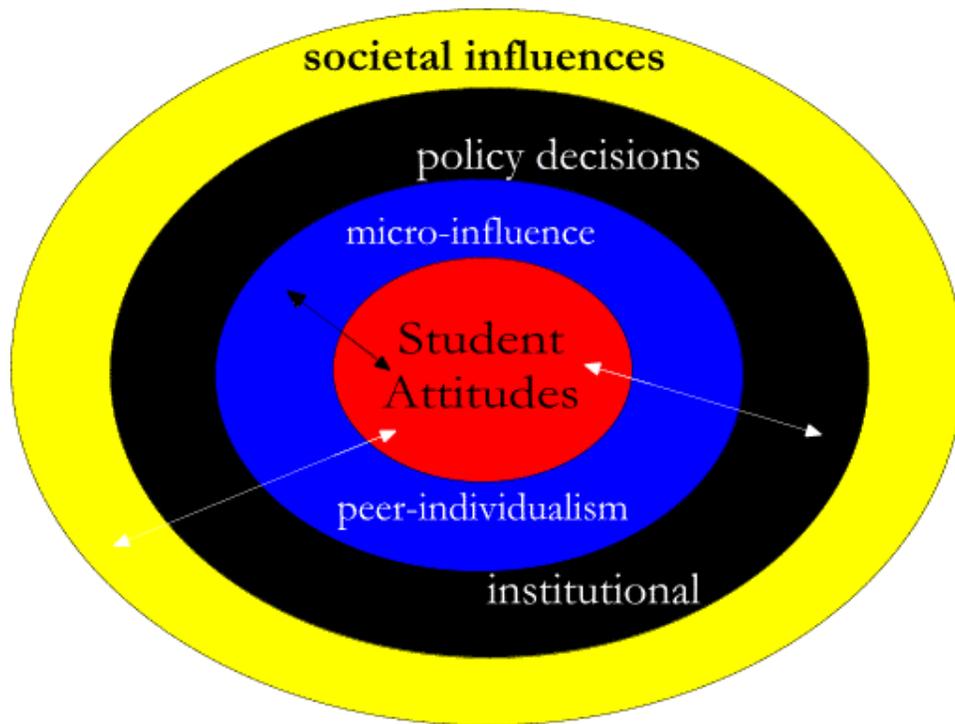
The MWC and VCS Theorised Cases are included as Appendices 5 and 6 respectively.

### **Identifying the layers and their relationships**

The research propositions from the interpretative cases, as developed and verified by the student participants throughout the collaborative analysis, were then bundled under three main headings. These headings, drawn from the issues identified in the literature review, represented the three primary layers of social relations influencing student attitudes to schooling. If and when social context is reflected on as an influence in educational research and conclusions, such studies often fail to elaborate and/or draw upon a consistent and practical framework of analysis that explains the complexities of the educational setting in terms of its place in social structure. It was the intention of this research to identify, understand and where possible generalise from the actual relations and contradictions that exist between the various layers of social relations and the specific micro-settings of education (the school, the classroom, the teacher etc).

Figure 5. represents the basic working model initially drafted as a framework for understanding these relations and contradictions.

Figure 5. Three primary 'layers' of social relations influencing student attitudes



Throughout the course of the study, this model was expanded in complexity and hence explanatory power, with the particular aim of elaborating the key dialectics between society (local and global), the school environment and the individual student. In this way, arriving at generalisations about the specific dynamics of student attitudes to learning.

**Figure 6. Matching data to the Developed Hypothesis**

Layers of Influence		Research Propositions
SOCIETY (global and local)	Economic patterns (socio-economic status, economic policies)	
	Political patterns (political context of education)	
	Ideological patterns (social context of education)	
SCHOOL COMMUNITY	Educational content	
	School environment	
	Teachers	
	Parents	
	Peers	
INDIVIDUAL	Self perceptions of success/failure	
	Aspirations	
	Experience	

\*For reasons of space the bundled research propositions themselves are included in full as Appendix 7.

Figure 6 shows how, in grouping the research propositions under the three original headings, further threads and patterns emerged, revealing layers within the layers and offering greater insight into their impact on student attitudes to schooling. Such an approach lead to a form of grounded theory building (Hutchinson 1990) as "...incident to incident connections were made across documents...and when concepts emerged, incidence to concept connections were made." (Cherednichenko, Davies et al. 2001)

To ensure validity, those incidents or comments which were not included in the initial sketches of experience and which did not 'fit' the research propositions were not ignored. Rather they were considered as further information and detail, and where these constituted a direct conflict with a research proposition they are noted as such in chapters 4 and 5. As

Cherednichenko suggests, "(r)ecording these details helped to clarify distinctions and also allowed for unpredictable themes to emerge." (Cherednichenko, Davies et al. 2001)

### **Stage Three: Comparative Research**

Despite a turbulent place in the history of educational research, comparative education is today recognised as an increasingly important area of study. However there is also widespread agreement that a refocus is necessary in the changing international context of education (Watson 2001).

Broadfoot suggests that "...the significantly increased profile of *comparative* studies as a whole in recent years that the advent of globalisation and particularly, global competition has fuelled, has helped to focus policy-makers' attention, as well as that of scholars, on what can be learned from the educational activities of other countries and other societies." (Broadfoot 2000, pg. 7) In this context, she argues for a new comparative education methodology, equipped to play a new, urgently required role in the current international educational context. Her critique of existing educational institutions and structures asserts the need for such research to challenge pre-conceived ideas and norms, and in doing so, not only highlight their failures but also contribute concretely to the forging of new and different ideas and approaches to concepts of education and learning.

She argues that to date, comparative education has failed largely in this task.

It has so far largely failed to use its increasingly explicit interest in culture to work towards a greater balance in seeking to understand the relationship between structure and agency, self and context; to recognise the way in which power is incorporated within existing educational discourses such that alternatives become almost literally unthinkable (Broadfoot 2000, pg. 11).

She concludes by suggesting that comparative educationalists "...have a particular responsibility to carry the debate beyond the discussion of means alone. And towards ends." (Broadfoot 2000, pg. 14)

Just as the importance of understanding contextual considerations was stressed in the literature review, so too is it in relation to the comparative education approach adopted. Watson speaks of the danger of misreading or worse ignoring other contexts. He cites as the biggest challenge facing comparative education today, the problem of decontextualised data and statistics. In particular, he notes the criticisms directed towards research conducted in developing countries by international agencies, which focus on short-term issues and are arguably connected directly to desired ideological and economic outcomes (Watson 2001). While this study does not fall under that category, the emphasis on this type of research in current literature necessitates a comment here, is interconnected with the more general points about the context of education made in Chapter 2, and further, raises points about the contextualisation of analysis which are pertinent.

The literature review presented an analysis of the current context of education. McGrath suggests that

...the way that universities and research are becoming increasingly subject to market forces is a crucial element that must be factored into our analysis of the future of international and comparative education.” (McGrath, 2001:265)

As Watson discusses

...more comparative studies are being undertaken than ever before, but by non-specialists, by consultants and by politicians or by educationists from quite different backgrounds, many of whom have a preconceived policy agenda rather than looking longer term and objectively (Watson 2001, pg. 11).

Watson stresses that detail about political, social and economic context “... is essential both for meaningful comparison as well as for contextual analysis.” (Watson 2001, pg. 12) This perspective, historically present in debates within the methodological tradition of comparative education research (Rust 2003), along with Broadfoot’s belief in the fundamental need to approach comparative education studies from a socio-cultural perspective, reflects the philosophy of the comparative aspect of this study.

## **Spanish Language Literature Review**

It is all too often the case that the literature reviews of Australian research projects are limited to documents in the English language. While this represents a significant weakness in general, in the context of this study it would be particularly problematic, given the points just emphasised regarding socio-political and cultural contextualisation.

In the first instance, the historical and contemporary links of the Cuban education system with both Latin American and Spanish educational philosophy and practice, necessitate a thorough investigation of the major contemporary trends and debates in Spanish language texts in those countries. Furthermore, such an investigation reveals rich, extensive and well documented, teaching and learning experiences which offer invaluable insight and example for educators and researchers in Australia today. In particular, cutting-edge studies and thought on pedagogy, alternative learning strategies, working with students from disadvantaged backgrounds (ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, poverty, health and so on), teaching strategies, and the role of schooling and education within society, and the lively debates surrounding them are extensive.

Moreover, as LeMétais suggests, while primary sources can be difficult to access for a range of reasons, “secondary sources...as processed information...may contain inherent mistakes or misinterpretations.” (LeMétais 1999)

The literature review in the Spanish language involved a range of activities throughout the research project. Web searches of Spanish language education journals as well as library resources of Universities throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean were conducted regularly. Similarly individual programs, resources and contacts were sought and researched on a range of education, community and political web pages. Furthermore, an extensive review of contemporary Cuban and Latin American texts in educational philosophy and practice was carried out.

It should be noted that all translations of Spanish documents into English presented in this thesis were carried out by the author with assistance from Jorge Jorquera. The author assumes full responsibility for any errors.

## Methodology for comparison of data

A review of the comparative education literature suggests that a very diverse range of methodological approaches are employed. Rust et al. note the scarce reference to methodology in comparative education literature in general (Rust, Soumare, Pescador and Shibuya 1999). In the absence of a wholly appropriate, contemporary comparative methodological approach, this study draws on a number of methodologies in establishing a framework for the comparative stage of the research.

Trethewey (1979) offers valuable guidance in ensuring the trustworthiness and accuracy of any comparison made between two sets of data in his *Pitfalls in Comparative Education*. He suggests careful consideration is required in ensuring reliable information is gathered, ensuring comparability, ensuring different purposes or intentions are taken into account, ensuring the generality – specificity trap is avoided, and finally in considering the choice of systems, countries or cases for comparison (Trethewey 1979, pg. 41-48).

The theorised cases and their expanded explanation provided two sets of data to be compared. Using an unfolding and constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, cited in (Merriam 1998), the key conclusions were illuminated as the relationships between research propositions and the identified layers of social relations became clear.

In the constant comparative method, according to Glaser and Strauss, “(h)ypotheses are the suggested links between categories and properties.” (Merriam 1998, pg. 190) An example of the application of this method in this study can be seen in figure 7.

**Figure 7. Example of application of constant comparative method**

Category	Properties	Hypothesis
Teachers	Relationships Trust Respect Fairness Boredom Creativity Excitement	A positive relationship between teachers and students, one that fosters collaboration, a sense of participation, encourages independent thinking, and which stimulates an exciting learning environment is considered by students to be critical in determining the ‘success’ of a learning environment.

The hypothesis is then compared across the two sets of data.

Both deductive and inductive strategies were employed. In discussing Glaser and Strauss, Merriam suggests that although this manner of building theory is

...largely an inductive process, there are times throughout the investigation when a deductive strategy is used. Tentative categories, properties and hypotheses continually emerge and must be tested against the data – that is, the researcher asks if there are sufficient data to support a certain category or hypothesis. If so, the element is retained; if not, it is discarded. Thus the researcher is continually shifting back and forth between deductive and inductive modes of thinking.” (Merriam 1998, pg. 192)

This is a fair description of the experiences of this research.

The theorised case studies were also compared quantitatively with each other in the context of general statistical and demographical information collated in each country. Despite obvious and numerable differences, Cuba and Australia share some similar educational concerns, albeit on different levels, for example; retention rates, transition/pathways, and integration of learning technologies (Mtonga 1993; Lutjens 2000; Connors 2000).

Some discrepancies lead to a consciousness of the need to be confident of the reliability and comparability of statistical information being used. For example there was found to be some discrepancy between national and state figures on Victorian education offered amongst Australian Bureau of Statistics materials. Although (Aguirre and Vichot 1998) found the vast majority of Cuba’s educational statistics to be reliable, particular attention was paid to data sources used in this study.

### **Collaborative Social Research for social change**

The following two chapters bring the methodology outlined here alive, and confirm its appropriateness to the aims of this study. In presenting the data themselves, and by elaborating on the experiences of the research process, the collaborative social research

method is better understood, and its potential for facilitating educational research for social change revealed.

Furthermore, the presentation of the comparative findings in Chapter 6 is framed explicitly through the key recommendations for reform. In all senses the development of the methodological approaches throughout the course of the research project, have been guided by the study's unambiguous commitment to improving student attitudes to learning and to educational reform and social change.

## **Chapter 4.**

This chapter presents the findings of the Australian leg of research. It provides a discussion of the experiences and attitudes of the Melbourne West College (MWC) students in the context of the broader educational setting of Victoria, Australia, and gives a picture of the research process. In presenting the concrete data themselves, it builds upon and offers greater insight into the theoretical perspectives put forward in Chapter 2, and the methodological questions raised in Chapter 3.

### **Melbourne West College**

Melbourne West College is considered typical of secondary schools in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, a region which is recognised as experiencing a higher ratio of socio-economic disadvantage compared to most others across Melbourne. It has approximately 1500 students across three campuses, representing a diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Students are able to participate in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, from school plays to a range of sporting teams/events. Year 10 is the final year for students attending the junior campuses, with students studying English, Mathematics, Studies of Society and the Environment, Science, Health and Physical Education, Sport and a Language Other Than English as core subjects, and choosing electives from the Arts and Technology areas. Year 10's at MWC also participate in a two week block of work experience, and have the opportunity to undertake some VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) and VET (Vocational Education and Training) subjects as well.

### **Collecting data in Australia**

It is considered that the students who voluntarily participated in this study are more or less reflective of a broad spectrum of students. Students were attracted to the study for a range of reasons - some chose to participate because they were intrigued by the research, others because of the previously established rapport with the researcher. Furthermore, because the research was pitched very strongly as “wanting to understand your views of schooling” there was nothing unattractive to less academically confident (or able – a debatable

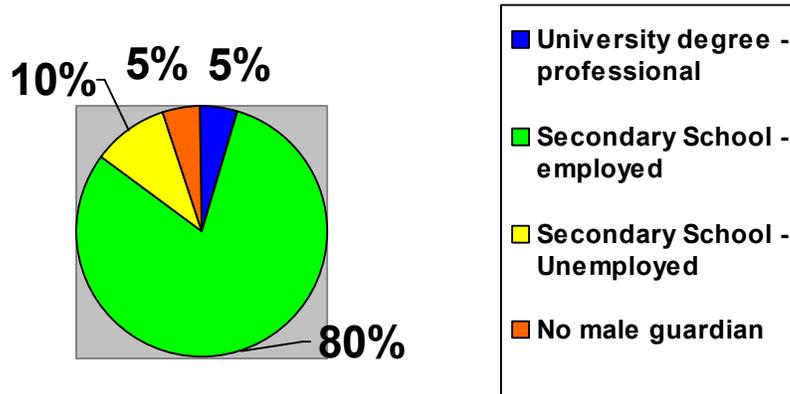
classification in any case) students, or those students who were usually less motivated about school tasks.

Students considered the study novel and interesting. Significant effort was made to establish that research participation involved no specific requirements or abilities. This facilitated the involvement of a wide range of students from the school population. The only thing that can be said to have been particular about the sample is the willingness of these students to express their opinions. While not within the scope of this investigation, the significance of this point in and of itself is not lost on the researcher. Most students saw the opportunity as positive and absent of any judgment of them or their opinions. This provided a safe environment for authentic data gathering.

Moreover, as this group of students were all known to the researcher prior to this study, an albeit subjective assertion can be made, that the participants were representative of a range of student types. Some were highly motivated and academically “successful”, one was a student continually on “the edge” and in danger of being removed from the school (due to academic failure, behavioural issues, and difficulties in relating to most teachers - such students are often classified as being "at risk"), while others could be said to fall somewhere in between these commonly considered extremes. Quantitative demographic data shows that the students’ parents are broadly reflective of an experience that could be considered typical of the suburbs surrounding and therefore connected to MWC, with regards education and employment. See Figures 8 and 9. According to one report which draws on statistics from the 2001 census, average weekly earnings in the suburbs serviced by MWC are lower than state averages, and a greater percentage of the adult population have no formal qualifications beyond secondary school (Harding, Yap and Lloyd 2004).

Ensuring that the students viewed the opportunity to be involved in this study as a positive and non-judgmental experience, proved critical in terms of the sample’s representativeness. Speculation that students who are generally successful, and have a positive attitude towards schooling would be much more likely to voluntarily participate than those who viewed school negatively and often experienced failure, proved unfounded.

Figure 8. Father or male guardian education and employment - Australia

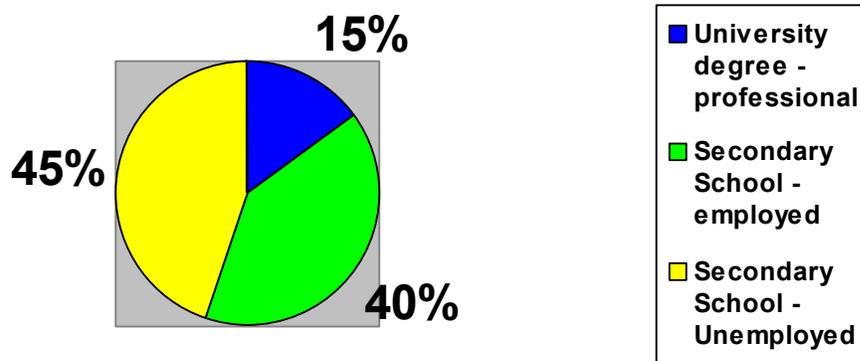


### Case Writing and Action Research

As the first substantial opportunity to present their views, the MWC students' written cases provided fresh, raw insights into attitudes to learning. The students answered the following two questions.

- What makes a positive learning environment for you? Describe what elements make your learning experience positive. What interferes with your learning?
- Describe your ideal school. What would schools need to have, or need to be/look like to provide the perfect learning environment?

Figure 9. Mother or female guardian education and employment - Australia



Amongst the information gathered from the cases, was a range of commonly expressed views, albeit in embryonic form, which provided a starting point for the further exploration of certain views and topics. The individual angle illuminated by the cases revealed the general priorities, emphases and concerns of each student, more so than any other aspect of the data collection process. At the same time, these personal reflections were presented largely in the form of generalities, rather than detailed, specific descriptions of experience. An example of a case written by a MWC student is included as Appendix 8.

Given the nature of the information provided by the written cases, it was recognised that further interviews and collaborative discussions were required. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. While it is certainly the case that the methodological tool of case writing is challenging for young people unaccustomed to expressing their opinions in such a way, it was also the case that limitations in the data collection process (primarily a lack of time) created confusion, or allowed room for confusion around the point of the case writing exercise. Without a clear understanding the students did not feel completely confident with the process, and therefore limited their comments to more generalised, non-specific reflections. Including more interviews and collaborative discussions proved successful in creating a more comfortable environment for the students, not only facilitating a freer and more open dialogue, but also and importantly generating a combination of data to be triangulated.

### **The challenges of student-oriented research**

A recent national survey conducted by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (Manning and Ryan 2004) found that while 77.9% of students felt “a great deal affected” by decisions made by educational institutions, only 19.4% felt they had a “great deal” of influence over those decisions.<sup>7</sup> As discussed in Chapter 2, young people in Australia are presented with few opportunities to contribute to educational policy development.

Given that it is a normal experience, when working with groups of people for whom open dialogue is not a standard practice, for participants to be hesitant, the environment for

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly a smaller sample of Indigenous students within the broader sample had slightly different views, with 60.3% stating that decisions made by educational institutions affected them “a great deal” and 36.8% stating that they felt they had a “great deal” of control over those decisions.

constructive dialogue within this study did take a while to establish. However, dialogue during the process of explaining the research demonstrated a genuine interest in the study and generated immediate ideas and questions from the students. Moreover, the “right” conditions of anonymity, confidentiality, trust and respect (Cullingford 2002, pg. 32-33) were consciously fostered.

It is felt that by and large, complications experienced throughout the process, highlighted the weaknesses of an educational experience which largely ignores student contribution. Moreover, the overall success of the student-oriented aspects of the project legitimised the commitment to presenting students’ ideas as intrinsically valid.

While students were initially unconfident in contributing freely – not having done anything like this before, they were not reluctant. A certain discomfort was a function of their own lack of confidence in expressing their ideas; the surprise of being asked about their views and an inclination to not “stuff it up for Miss”. Consequently, the relationship previously established between student and teacher became the primary motivation for continuing with the research. Ultimately, only half of the original 20 students continued until the final stage of the research, with some finding the later stages of collaborative analysis particularly challenging, and also resenting the time spent on non-compulsory, but in their minds school related tasks.

The reaction from students to the research methodology is in fact part of the body of evidence revealed by the investigation – an important indicator of the dis-empowering character of the Australian educational environment. Without any consistent role in the formation and reform of the educational establishment, students reacted naturally to what was asked of them in the research:

*Why would you want my opinion?*

One of the expected benefits of action research is the empowerment of participants and their development through the research process itself (Atweh, Christensen et al. 1998). This was very much the case with this study, with most of the students quickly warming up to the situation and gaining confidence and comfort in expressing their views. Through the open interviews and the collective reflection on the interpretative case, the students began

to make more insightful comments elaborating generalisations, which helped to draw out the main themes of the original cases. Themes that had initially been raised at quite a simple, one-dimensional level were discussed not only in more detail, but also in a less personal and more generalised way.

The young people interviewed had plenty to say and almost all of it provided directly useful and appropriate data for this research project. This is an impressive outcome in and of itself considering the background of student disenfranchisement in the educational setting. That said, it is also evident that one research project alone cannot overcome the entrenched alienation students feel from the research process. The fact that not all students continued to the end raises the question

*Why, after positive involvement in research where their opinions are valued, did 1/2 of the participants choose not to continue to the final stages of the project?*

Answering this question requires a completely different study. However, it is likely that the students felt pressured to spend their time doing regular and perhaps perceived therefore as more legitimate schoolwork, and/or the challenges of the later, analytical stages of the research proved too confronting. Such conjecture raises other questions about the particular experiences, and social and economic situation of the MWC students, and how these intersected to impact on the students' response to involvement in the study. For example, how differently would students at wealthier schools, with greater parental support and interest in their education, and fewer time constraints, i.e. no employment react?

### **School Response to Research Project**

The response from MWC to this research project was generally positive. The principal and staff were supportive of and interested in the project. However it was clear from the beginning that the process was viewed as a distraction from class, with organisation therefore becoming a matter of "asking the class teachers nicely" if they wouldn't mind sparing 20 minutes for a presentation of the research to their students. While such a response is completely understandable given the time constraints on class teachers and the pressure to complete set curriculum etc, it frustratingly results in anything extra-curricular such as this research project, being immediately perceived as an annoyance, even by those

supportive of its aims. *Great idea, just not in my classroom.* The contradiction demonstrates that this is less an inherent attitudinal issue than an indication of structural barriers to participation, and the enforced separation between theory and practice in general, as elaborated in Chapter 2.

The first three meetings between students and researcher were relegated to a lunchtime, a period late in the day only if other work had been completed, or in one case a day when almost half of the participants were away from school competing in an inter-school sports competition. The final group meeting took place during an early morning period after this was negotiated between the researcher and the principal on the basis that the project was being undermined. It was argued that there were too many barriers to student participation being put in place before they were even able to decide themselves if they were interested. As a result the third meeting was a successful experience with all but two of the students attending.

Beyond the question of time allocation was the individual approach of the teachers involved. In supporting the project, their original encouragement of the students to be involved was at times, almost coercive, and their reaction to the students' absences from the first two lunchtime meetings essentially disciplinarian, offering to 'follow them up'. Rather than being seen as a negative response from staff to the project itself, such contradictions may be seen as inevitable outcomes of the overall context of student disengagement as outlined in chapter 2, in particular as manifested through staff attitudes and experiences. These experiences of the research process are further examined in Chapter 6.

A range of other factors influenced the development of the research. Due to the different school calendars in Cuba and Australia and the need to organise an international research trip around these differences, there was initially less time to conduct research in Australia than originally expected. Particularly given the difficulty in confirming a schedule with MWC. One very significant change as a result of these circumstances was that a number of the individual interviews with the MWC students were conducted using the MSN Messenger program over the Internet. While there is no space within this study to reflect on this in detail, it was ultimately a fascinating aspect of the data collection process. The students seemed to view MSN messenger as the next closest thing to face-to-face chatting.

Interviews conducted over MSN messenger were fluid, dynamic and lively and appeared to have students completely at ease, speaking honestly and openly. It is suggested that the distance, physically speaking but also in terms of being able to more carefully contemplate an answer before clicking the return button, made students more relaxed.

### **Contextualising Student Attitudes**

Chapter 2 reflected on the current economic and social context of education. This investigation sought to capture student attitudes to their schooling within this context, and identify the different ways in which the layers of the social experience of education impact upon them.

The research provided concentrated data expressing the layers of influence - society, school community and individual, on student attitudes. Unpacking this data involved the application of theoretical perspective. The opinions expressed by students on everything from curriculum content to school lunches were considered as intelligent comment, even if coded, on the circumstances or layers of influence determining these attitudes.

Theoretically the researcher was not content with just exploring fragments. The layers of influence on students were considered as part of a whole, the unfashionable totality of being a student in a market-dictated society, where both school environment and individual identity are defined thus.

Each case and interview highlighted just how disenfranchised students feel, regardless of their place in the school hierarchy or meritocracy. Moreover, there is an indication in the data that it is not simply the school community that defines student attitudes. If students are disenfranchised from their schooling, from their education, they are just as disenfranchised by society as a whole. This was revealed through the process of bundling the research propositions, which are included in full as Appendix 7.

Who students are, as individuals, seems less cause than effect. Every student attitude has a string of determinants, the most fundamental or influential of which seem to be at the level of society – family, socio-economic place, ideological predispositions. These layers of influence interact dynamically in such a way that the individual student develops their individuality and imposes it more or less influentially on their circumstances, on society and

their school community. All students may be structurally disenfranchised but how they experience this, as destructive or constructive rebellion, is a matter of contestation, and a key issue to be explored further in Chapter 6.

### **School is OK**

Overall the attitude towards schooling of these students was that it is OK. In general they perceived it as better than something else, and suggested that it could be worse. In particular they identified the “good bits” as spending time with friends and doing schoolwork they enjoyed.

*School is OK I guess, we have to go and yeah it can be good and it can be bad, like it has its moments. The good bits are when you get teachers that are laid back, have fun, and like they are serious when they have to be and like fun subjects like PE, sport and surf life saving. The bad bits are when you get really bad teachers that just tell you what to do without explaining, when you get in trouble for petty little things and the strictness of some teachers when they could be a little more relaxed.*

Most of the students initial responses were framed in the positive, despite the fact that subsequent, specific discussions based on these initial comments drew out a broad range of criticisms, rather than any elaboration on the “good bits”. In discussing research with students, and in particular its validity in and of itself, Cullingford makes the following points.

What children say seems like ‘soft’ data. Sometimes we would prefer to see it that way, especially when it undermines many of the cherished assumptions about educational delivery. Children do not *seek* to question (Davies 1982). They have an inbuilt conservatism and yearning for the status quo. They will not readily criticise the circumstances to which they are trying so hard to adapt. What they say is revealing, almost despite themselves.” (Cullingford 2002, pg. 25-26)

While there is no space here to discuss these claims in the context of an analysis of the educational experience the MWC students face, they are nevertheless interesting in light of the students’ initial responses. Throughout this study, criticisms raised were almost always

accompanied with intelligent solutions - the students were problem solving. A genuine interest in discussing how their school experience could be improved, how school could be more engaging and how their learning environment could be more effective was evident. Once probed, the students offered thoughtful and diverse criticisms as well as ideas for alternatives and possibilities for change.

### **The Economic context of schooling**

In the context of increasing funding to private schools at the expense of public schools (Hayward and Esposto 2004), economic factors are impairing public schools' ability to provide a quality education. The MWC students seem acutely aware of the myriad effects at the school level, in particular time and resource constraints on teachers. While very critical of their teachers approach to students, and of teaching methods in general, the students often contextualised this, by recognizing the difficulties they face. Almost all of the students spoke of the lack of time teachers have to properly assist each pupil.

*All subjects should have more than one teacher... so you don't sit there all class waiting for the teacher to come over and help you*

*(In the perfect school) there would be a 1:10 teacher/ student ratio, at the most ensuring that all students get enough attention.*

*...school would be much better if the classes were smaller like 10 people in a class, then that way the teachers would be able to help us more.*

School class sizes have been an ongoing important issue for debate in education policy. (Hanushek 1998) provoked criticism of the well established belief that smaller classes lead to improved learning outcomes, and seems to have been embraced by those pushing the conservative political agenda of cuts to education spending, for example (Buckingham 2003). However, there remains widespread agreement that smaller class sizes, particularly in the early years of schooling, do in fact improve learning outcomes (AEU 1995).<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Also reflective of broader sentiment are the positions taken by political parties in Australia, see for e.g., [http://www.nswalp.com/alp/alpWeb\\_Content.nsf/newsPage?openagent&CLASS\\_SIZES](http://www.nswalp.com/alp/alpWeb_Content.nsf/newsPage?openagent&CLASS_SIZES), <http://www.vic.liberal.org.au/MediaCentre/StateMedia/17052004Class.htm>,

Australian Education Union Victoria calls for classes to be capped at 20 from kindergarten through Year 12 (Martin 2003). The MWC students made it very clear that they believe they would learn more effectively in smaller classes. They suggest that it is a constant battle for the teacher's attention in a classroom of at best 25 or at worst more students, and that this means less effective learning.

Similarly, the fact that many public schools are lacking resources and adequate facilities (Australian Education Union 2004) does not go unnoticed by students. When asked to consider what an ideal learning environment would look like, the students made many criticisms about the physical environment of their schools, and explained how this impacts negatively on their learning.

*Classrooms would have air-conditioning... therefore students would actually be comfortable enough to learn.*

Most of the MWC classrooms have no air-conditioning and are unbearably hot in the summer. Like many public schools they would love to have air-conditioning, but as one of many needs it is probably not often prioritised in school budgets. A reflection of the serious lack of resources the public system is faced with, it is something the students consider important.

The comments made by students about the physical environment of MWC reflect a level of thoughtfulness about the question *What is a positive learning environment?* In this respect they are consistent with almost all of the data gathered. The students' responses clearly suggested that they want to learn, they want to do well, and are frustrated by the barriers they see as preventing them from achieving this. Their criticisms by and large, are offered alongside constructive suggestions for a possible solution.

Comments made by the MWC students about smaller class sizes, better facilities and resources are consistent with the feedback obtained from students from the Better Schools Website in 2003, established as part of the development of the Victorian Government's Blueprint for Education (Ryan and Islam 2003).

## **The political context of schooling - whose school is it?**

The curriculum of our education system is determined in the context of the economic and political needs of capitalism, as opposed to the needs of young people. This fundamental relationship ultimately undermines the best attempts made to reform the curriculum, or as Teese puts it, progress in attempts to reduce structural inequality in our schooling requires

... a collective response on behalf of the most disadvantaged groups... needed to match the corporate power exercised by the socially most advantaged families. This implies an integrated approach, based on a theoretical grasp of the system of inequality, without which improvements are likely to be negligible and initiatives contradictory." (Teese 2000, pg. 224)

It was made clear in Chapter 2 that at present, the curricular emphasis in our schools reflects the current contradictions of the neo-liberal political and economic agenda. Schools need to adopt increasingly corporate models of operation while appearing to address the question of democratic schooling to encourage active citizenship. It is this context that shapes curriculum development.

Combined with this is the passive role assigned to students in all matters of educational policy development. Students have no input into the curriculum and no recourse to express dissatisfaction.

This antagonism between what is important to young people and what is important in schools was reflected in students' comments about the curriculum.

*School is sometimes pretty stupid. I think some of the stuff we learn there is bull.*

*...half the stuff in maths we will never use... we shouldn't have to do Italian, that is so shit and the biggest waste of time ever, they should teach us things that we will use in our life...*

*Now they have introduced this thing called homeroom meetings, it's only at MWC. It's so stupid. It goes for 9 minutes, so now we finish school later, it's just a waste of time.*

Despite this contextual antagonism, the students' comments were varied, thoughtful and not simply limited to undirected criticism. The main complaint expressed was the charge of irrelevance, with the students viewing their subjects as not being useful to them later in life.

*We should learn more things that we need in life, like we don't need ALGEBRA!!!! That's just crap that confuses us, ... teachers should give kids a survey about what they want to learn at the end of each year and take a look at it before doing the school charter thingie.*

*An ideal school would be one where you do things that you want to do when you grow up.*

The apparent non-involvement of students in establishing curriculum objectives alienates them from any process of cumulative knowledge and the development of skill bases. Inevitably, the curriculum is not understood by the students, and therefore often considered irrelevant. This example of students' disconnection from the schooling process contributes to the alienation of students discussed in Chapter 2.

In their day-to-day experiences, subjects are often not explained to students in terms of their purpose or objectives. This seems particularly to be the case with Languages Other Than English (LOTE) as well as some non-core subjects, with several students expressing resentment at having to do such, in their view useless subjects. While the scope of the research did not allow a thorough investigation of this perception, it is clear that the establishment of LOTE subjects as core subjects to Year 10 has not been clearly motivated or therefore accepted by students. This could be said for school staff in general, with LOTE as well as other non-core subjects often being seen as less of a priority, reflected in parent and teacher perceptions, community perceptions, timetabling, etc (Australian Education Union 2003). In this context it is understandable that students would not view these subjects as the important ones, which in general, are those seen as most likely to be of help in securing employment in the future.

Alongside this, many of the students saw their level of skill or proficiency in an area, as a similarly important gauge when ranking subjects. *I'm good at it so I like it.*

The students view their subjects in complete isolation. Some are good, some are bad. This arises from the compartmentalised nature of the curriculum in general. Despite much good

discussion and some practical initiatives with regard a cross-curriculum focus, in schools today it is still very much a case of every subject for themselves. In the context of teachers having less and less control over the curriculum (Teese 2000) it is no surprise that students are given no space to contribute. As a result, choices about curriculum for students are often reduced to individual talents and interests, or based on the individual teachers who take the classes. This leads to confusion and frustration as attempts to reconcile such choices with what the students perceive to be perceived as important, are made. That said, the curriculum although they don't refer to it as such is considered important by students, and they appear interested in understanding more about what they need to know and why they need to know it.

### **Relevance leads to more effective learning.**

The students made a very strong connection between the perception of a subject as relevant and a positive learning environment. Students are more likely to be motivated in a subject they see as relevant, therefore more likely to try hard and more likely to look for ways to make the best of the situation. The students suggest that they learn more effectively in subjects they find relevant and useful. Furthermore, they were unanimous in suggesting that they don't learn very much in subjects they find irrelevant. This is congruent with the many and varied literature in particular that addressing the middle years of schooling, suggesting that possibilities for genuine learning are lessened significantly if students do not understand why and/or what they are supposed to be learning.

### **Decision making in schools**

*Researcher: Who makes the decisions when changes are made about your schooling?*

*Student: How am I supposed to know that.. I just go to school, maybe the education department?*

*The Queen? (laughs) Bill Clinton? The government?*

*Researcher: What about at the school level?*

*Student: ummm...the campus principal, the education department?*

*Researcher: Do students get a say?*

*Student: I don't bloody know. Umm, nope, nope and nope, although we are starting to be heard through SRC, but not very much.*

*Researcher: What types of things can you change through SRC?*

*Student: Abb, small things like the food at the canteen, out of uniform day, new places to sit at recess and lunch, school discos.*

*Researcher: Do you think students should have more of a say?*

*Student: yep...definitely.*

*Researcher: About what sort of things?*

*Student: Maybe important things like subjects and stuff, how money is spent.*

*Researcher: Why do you think students don't have a say?*

*Student: Because people don't care about teenagers, and think what we say isn't important, and also they think they know what goes on because they used to be our age, but like I tell my mother...when she was my age, a lot has changed since then.*

*Student: no I don't think students have a say in it cos it's whatever the school needs and the principal looks at that. But the kids should be heard because they are the ones who have to learn in the school and they see the faults and the things (the principal and the school council) are changing, and sometimes the changes are wrong and they don't know it cos they haven't seen it*

*Honestly I think students get jack all a say in anything to do with school, even at MWC in the SRC, all student decisions have to get FINAL APPROVAL by the school board which is totally unfair*

*Student: No, they don't really care what we think, they don't ask us our opinion and they are usually working on the school while we are working, it's disruptive.*

A picture of the lack of democracy in schools, presented by Bessant, well reflects the experiences and impressions of the MWC students.

Schools offer young people many developmental rights, the value of which cannot be denied. Schools are also undemocratic institutions. The mandatory and prolonged nature of schooling comes with the denial of students' rights to freedom of speech and movement. Students rarely have the right to say how the school is run or how teachers and other adults should conduct themselves. As students, young people are routinely denied the right to participate in decision-making that directly affects them such as the curriculum to which they are exposed. Any rights to privacy are regularly undone by mandatory and surprise bag checks and locker

inspections and most recently by placing surveillance cameras in student toilets. There is also an insistence on ready obedience, and a refusal to acknowledge most liberties that other citizens enjoy as a matter of course like choices about hairstyles, clothing and so forth (Bessant 2004, pg. 392-393).

The MWC students see teachers, principals or unknown authorities making the important decisions in schools. Their perception is that this inevitably leads to decisions not in the students' interest, because they see their positions, motivations and influences as being diametrically opposed – with more or less developed analyses of such a situation. One example was the question of resources and allocation of monies. The students felt strongly that money was being spent on the wrong things.

*Our school recently got like over a million dollars and they are spending it on repairing the school, not on us.*

*...teachers should spend money on things we want to see...*

*Student: Not all the students know enough what goes on, students should know what's happening, like you know like where the money's going, not just told what they're gonna do. How do you know if they spend it in the area what they say and stuff like that. The students could be told if they see the minutes of the meeting they have, or they're read out at assemblies, and that kind of stuff.*

*Researcher: If students did have a say, what kind of changes do you think would be made?*

*Students: I think we could give ideas to help the school improve facilities, and look after students, make them feel safe if they have to, because schools need the students otherwise there will be no school for very long.*

The students had many suggestions for addressing resource shortages, and allowing more money to be spent in other areas.

*...maybe if there is no money, the school could share facilities with the community. My cousin's school has a pool and old people and other people in the area use it too, I think that's a good idea.*

*(The perfect school would) ...also have like a swimming pool in the middle of the courtyard so at lunchtime you can just relax around it. This will also save the students money because we won't have to pay to do swimming lessons and we can have the carnivals at our school instead of somewhere else.*

### **The ideological context of schooling - it's not our school**

The students' responses overwhelmingly depicted resentment at the controlling atmosphere of school. Such reflections supported the assertion in Chapter 2 that schools play an important role in reproducing mainstream ideology and in preparing students to fit into capitalist society. One goes to school because one has to, and the 'best' student is one who best plays by the rules. However the rules are not those of the students and are deeply resented.

Whilst every student stressed that the best learning environment is one of trust and mutual respect, all complained that in general their school environment was based on the opposite. It is a situation of us and them. While the students stressed that there are some great teachers who are interested in them and their schooling, by and large teachers are attributed with making school a stressful place. Principals and others in administrative roles are depicted in the same way.

School is considered unfair. Teachers enforce rules that the students do not understand, nor agree with, nor see as relevant to them. Discipline is the order of the day, and yet it is administered unfairly. The students feel that many decisions made by teachers are unjustified, while many incidents/issues considered important are not followed up. The situation is perceived as hypocritical and unfair. Young adolescents feel a great deal of pressure to behave more maturely and take on adult responsibilities, but without any corresponding rights. They feel it is unfair that there are numerous restrictions on and expectations of them, but minimal if any guidelines on how teachers are to treat and interact with them. Teacher/student relationships are explored further later in this chapter.

The physical environment of school is uninspiring and uncomfortable. Boundaries are enforced. School uniforms are mandatory, and in the eyes of students living in an image conscious world, the last thing they would actually elect to wear. Timetables are not

adolescent friendly, with many students suggesting that they are unable to work effectively in the morning and would rather work a little later in the afternoon.

More generally, the students seem to view school as something more or less imposed on them. While they accept the stated importance of schooling in determining their future educational and employment possibilities, they see their participation as basically passive.

### **Support to succeed**

*(The ideal school) would be a school where doing well gets appraisal, but if a dismal effort is committed, then you would get support and not a kick out of the door.*

As already demonstrated, despite all the reasons the students feel they have to dislike school, and all the reasons they cite as de-motivators, they are perhaps surprisingly motivated to succeed. When they feel that there are objective factors preventing them from succeeding they feel very frustrated. They are able to name what it is about a particular learning environment that prevents them from having a positive learning experience. These are invaluable insights that educational research would do well to listen to. Often they are easily expected, and in line with existing thoughts and perceptions of learning. Other times however they provide a different angle, they reinforce a debated perspective or they challenge existing literature in an interesting and productive way.

One illuminating dialogue which took place in the first group interview at MWC is worth presenting here, as an example of the frustration students feel as well as their willingness to discuss and understand school and succeed at it. The students are discussing the lack of choice they are offered with respect to subject choices in Years 9 and 10, leading up to VCE.

*- It's because they don't trust us*

*- Yeah, like we're going to stuff up our decisions and wreck our future or something*

*Researcher: Why?*

*- You know, we're too young, too immature*

*- I think it's true. It's our whole life we're talking about. Usually we don't take these things seriously and we probably would make stupid choices, we don't really understand, we need the*

*teachers to tell us how to make good choices, you can't stuff around with your future, usually kids just pick subjects they think are fun, or that've got a good teacher or is a bludge or whatever, but what about if you get to Year 11 or 12 and they say you can't be what you want to be because you didn't do some subject before*

*- No it's that, you need some rules and more choices, more trust*

*- There needs to be more guidance, we could make better choices if we knew what the hell we were doing, if you know what you want to do it's easy, if you don't, then you're going to stuff it up, but there should be more time to decide and think about it and talk with your parents and stuff*

*- There needs to be boundaries, not rules*

*Yeah, no it's true, it's because you don't get any help, how can you make important decisions if you don't know what you're doing?*

*- We have too many subjects, and heaps of different types, it's hard to be specific straight away in one year, like chemistry and physics and biology, we've just done science and how do you know which one you need or want, or like or whatever*

*- Yeah we need help with that*

*- You only get to have a few interviews with some teachers, and sometimes if they're a good teacher they'll help you and tell you stuff otherwise it's just like, well you could do this and this and this*

*- But sometimes, a good teacher will give you the information you need and then you feel like it's going to be a good decision. But usually they don't give a shit really, and they just tell you what you can't do.*

Relevant to most of the assertions made throughout this chapter, this conversation raises in particular, the importance of schooling success to the students. While the desire for greater choice was a recurrent theme throughout the data, the students felt in the main, unprepared by their schooling experiences to make such choices.

### **School Structure**

The students spoke a lot about structural aspects of school they thought impacted negatively on their learning. The timetable in general drew complaints.

*There would be more double periods. E.g. instead of having English 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, and science 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> (like what we are having now) the timetable would have English 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> and science 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>. It will then ensure that students get enough time to actually get 'into' the class and*

*the teacher wouldn't have to rush things to fit into single periods or have to cut it in half and fit it in later in the day when they will have to, once again, spend the first 10 minutes settling the class down.*

*We shouldn't have too many different subjects in the one day.*

*Everyone's totally stuffed by period 6, it's useless and even the teachers say it. You can't learn anything in period 6 so it's always just waiting for the bell...*

Several times the students spoke about school starting later, the most popular time was 10.00am. Although they posed this seriously, and said that it was difficult to get going in the mornings, they obviously felt that it would be perceived negatively, as they always explained immediately after why it probably wouldn't be possible.

*I also think school should start later like 10:00 and finish at like 4:00, I would love that BUT that wouldn't give us enough time to learn shit.*

Alternatively they would think through how the timetable would then proceed.

*School would start at 10am, but it would finish at 4pm. There'd be 6 periods of 45 minutes, a one-hour lunch break and a half hour recess.*

The students also offered reasons as to why “kids played up” at lunchtimes and recess.

*At lunchtime and recess we are so bored, there is nothing to do. I don't know what lunchtime and recess is like at other schools but our school needs something. Our school recently got like over a million dollars and they are spending it on repairing the school, not on us. They should make nice shaded spots to hang out, they should make a room where we can chill, play cards, listen to music, watch TV or do some home work.*

*I think we should have more breaks in between classes instead of long breaks where kids get bored and get into trouble and the day shouldn't go for that long.*

Interestingly, another point raised by several students was the question of the school canteen. In an ideal school *Canteens would stock healthier food and at more reasonable prices*. School canteens have certainly changed in the context of increasingly corporatised schools. Previously, as largely parent/volunteer run outfits, operating within a school budget, canteens discussed the content of the food offered, as an aspect of a young person's educational and general development. Now, given that most canteens, like the one at MWC are out-sourced and managed by private companies, the purpose is to make a profit. Students, staff and parents have little say over the food being sold, and given broader trends in young people's eating habits, the topic of many studies, generally the unhealthiest, most successfully advertised food wins. While these new privatised canteens are realizing the goal to make a profit, the social crisis heralded in the media, a generation of increasingly obese Australian children, is only worsened. Based on significant research, for example (NSW Child Obesity Summit, NSW Department of Health 2002), some calls to address this have been made, see (Ewing 2002) and (NSW Department of Health 2003). The contradiction between such research and many canteens in schools today is yet another reflection of students' needs being overlooked within schools.

### **School and stress**

It is widely recognised that life is full of stress for young people, and that schooling as the main activity of a young person's life, causes stress (Healey 2002). A report from the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission cited in Healey (2002) notes the following as physical causes of stress.

- Lack of control over workloads, over-demanding workloads or schedules;
- Lack of clear direction from management;
- Lack of information on work role and objectives, career opportunities or job security;
- Conflict between individuals or areas, either section rivalry or personal discrimination or harassment;
- Poor physical working conditions, e.g. extreme changes in temperature, or working conditions that are too cold or too hot, or excessive noise or vibration levels;
- Concerns about exposure to hazardous chemicals or situations (Healey 2002, pg. 9).

While this list is obviously aimed at workplaces, the majority of it can be appropriately applied to the school setting and certainly bears relevance to the issues raised by the students in this study. The correlation between the causes of stress listed and the complaints made by the students about their learning environment is striking.

Often studies look at particular incidents in or aspects of schooling which could be stressful, for example bullying or exams. However, the data generated by this study suggests that school is stressful overall, in a general sense. The students could name a broad range of things that they found stressful. Interestingly, they were almost resigned in their acceptance of such things, it seemed as though school was expected to be stressful and therefore a “what can you do?” sort of attitude came through in students’ comments.

The students referred to a range of school experiences that made them feel personally unsupported. These covered situations within and outside of the classroom. Furthermore they suggested that their school was incapable of providing relief or support in dealing with such issues. This was reinforced in the written cases on the students’ ideal school.

*The perfect school would be somewhere you could go and feel free from pressure (deadlines, grades etc) and safe from oppression (bullying, tyrannic teachers etc).*

Also of relevance here is the fact that just over half of the MWC students work part-time to supplement their own, and in some cases their family’s income. The phenomenon of the working University student is well documented but perhaps less is known about the fact that more and more Secondary students are feeling pressured to work alongside their schooling. It is known that working young people are concentrated in the lowest paying, least secure jobs (Long 2004) – for example many of the MWC students work in fast food chains. Such workplace stress as well as general time constraints in juggling school, work and a personal life undoubtedly contribute further to the stress in young people’s lives.

## **Workload**

Students have ideas about what is a reasonable workload and get stressed if they think this is unfairly exceeded. Several made specific comments about homework. It is viewed as a very stressful aspect of schooling, with the students suggesting that not enough time was being given to complete work properly. On the whole they felt that homework in and of itself was fair, but that there was a limit to how much they could do effectively. Moreover they complained that homework was often given all at once, e.g. at the end of a semester when reports were being compiled and suggested that if teachers consulted each other and staggered it throughout the year then they would be able to complete it much more effectively.

*(In an ideal school) the only homework will be assignments and unfinished work, which will not be piled up so they cannot handle it.*

*Teachers shouldn't give us assignments "ALL AT ONCE", they should all be responsible enough to check with each other before giving them to us. No wonder we don't do some of them, it's because we have too many, then we don't have a life at all, all we do is homework.*

In our schools the curriculum dictates workload rather than the needs or working pace of the students. Most certainly not at an individual level, but even in a general sense. The primary concern is that students have completed the required number of assignments upon which to base the established assessment.

## **Students and Teachers**

While the students made several comments about the content of their education, it was clear that in general they thought more about the delivery of information. Teachers and the day-to-day impact they have on students' learning was a major theme throughout the research process.

The question of student/teacher relationships is absolutely central to student attitudes to schooling. This forms a major part of how students perceive their schooling, and their

opportunities for learning. A major aspect of this relationship, resented by the students, is the hierarchical aspect, and what they see as one-sided respect.

The students accept and indeed agree that teachers should call the shots, and in fact blame teachers who “can’t control the class” for denying them a good learning environment. However, they do not accept that this should therefore be a one-way street of dominance/subordination, and they certainly resent being made to respect people who they do not see as respecting them.

The students appreciate teachers who offer them respect, and relate to them in a way that assumes a degree of interest and understanding in their lives and what’s important to them. They appreciate teachers who are open to student involvement in class decisions. They appreciate teachers who don’t assume respect, but who earn it, moreover they respect teachers who earn their respect. They see through the synthetic, students will respect teachers simply because they’re teachers, scenario.

### **Mutual respect and improved learning**

As Year 10 students about to face what are constantly referred to as the most important years of their lives, the participants are acutely aware of the contradictions of their school experience. Despite being told ad nauseam of the need to take things seriously and approach their final years in an adult way, they feel they are treated like children. They argue that they should be given more choices and greater freedom, and explain why in the context of a positive learning environment.

*...teachers should have a closer relationship with students, they can still have the power, but come across as more approachable to students, and that way students won’t always be challenging teachers and getting in trouble.*

Most often students expressed that the key factor in a good learning experience is having a good teacher – someone who listens, who explains, who treats students as equals, who knows their subject matter, and who gives them constructive feedback.

A comment made by a parent obtained through the Better Schools website offers one interesting insight into parent perceptions of student/teacher relationships.

The education system needs a total reform because as society has made huge leaps and changes in how we bring up children, the education system has not kept up with these sociological changes and expectations. Therefore children are getting mixed messages and are confused as to how they should really behave and what is expected of them. Society teaches children to verbalise thoughts, feelings and needs and offer opinions: when they go to school they are seen to be insolent and disruptive and disrespectful of authority. ... Teachers need to be more receptive to what children have to say as it can be of great value. Instead teachers are often threatened by this sort of behaviour. Make schools more child friendly and don't allow teachers to be the bullies they often are (Parent) (Ryan and Islam 2003, pg. 18).

The MWC students suggest that in a perfect school students would be treated as equals. Students will be expected to listen and learn from the teachers, but the teachers will also be required to listen and learn from the students.

*...good teachers (are those) that actually care about you and if you pass or fail.*

*I like to learn in a good school environment. Where you can have friendships with the teachers and not just a student teacher thing. I would find it more relaxing if it was like that.*

Their comments were not restricted to simple anti-teacher sentiments that perhaps many would expect. Rather, as noted earlier in the chapter, they reflected a certain understanding of the context in which teachers' teach.

*Teachers will have a certain amount of control on students like always, and students will have to respect that or leave the school, but in this environment, teachers and students will have a more 'friendship-based' relationship than just as a educator/ learner one, and hopefully no-one will be sent out.*

*I learn best in a more free, trusting environment. I mean, I know as a teacher you probably try that and get it spat back in your face, but I personally like it best when you don't get yelled at for blinking!*

The students spoke of the need for teachers to be “better qualified”. Generally this was in the context of teachers teaching classes which are not their main methods. Given the ongoing rationalisation of staff and the cutting back of many ‘non-essential’ subjects, teachers are often teaching more than one subject area. According to an Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) survey, teachers in 37% of schools are teaching subjects for which they have no formal qualifications (Graham 2004a). The students were very aware of this being the case at MWC. However when explored further, it became clear that this was more a reflection on teacher methods. While students used the term qualifications, they then went on to explain that

*...all teachers should have qualifications and be able to teach us new ways of doing things, not their old fogie ways*

*Cool teachers (are those) who know how to help you learn, and not just yell all the time, and stand up the front and give boring classes, they make stuff interesting and you know it's good that you know the subject, it's important.*

*...you get really bad teachers that just tell you what to do without explaining...*

*Some teachers...just want to teach and get that over and done with... there's nothing worse than just sitting with a textbook, when teachers don't listen*

The students associated a lack of qualifications with poor teaching. Often when this was drawn out it became clear that the students had recognised that a teacher taking a class outside of their method area, i.e. in which they were not qualified, generally appeared to the students to be less passionate and interested. This translated concretely into less dynamic lessons and in the students' view, less effective learning environments.

*This year in my Maths classes. I'm doing year 11 general maths, and I'm really regretting doing it because it's too complicated. I mean, it's not all that hard, it's just that it's my maths teacher, he*

*won't explain things properly and moves way too fast in the topics we are studying. In particular linear graphs. I can't do them no matter how hard I try and he won't even help me. He just says "why are you in this maths class then if you can't do linear graphs?" The way this guy teaches is putting me off maths, and I'm the kind of person who gets really frustrated if I can't do something and I give up if I keep getting upset, and that's exactly what's happening. It's negative on my behalf as my maths exam scores are going to be bad and if I don't get any better it'll put a bad mark on my final VCE result.*

## **Teaching methods**

Thus it followed that the teachers who are considered more qualified are those who show an interest in the subject, teach using creative methods, and who interact with the students in a more open and respectful way. They are considered more qualified by the students, because they feel that they learn far more effectively in these classrooms.

Some of the students connected this to a complaint that teachers are mostly "old" and the suggestion that a younger teacher was more likely to be dynamic and creative in the classroom. Younger teachers are more likely to be teachers that "actually teach".

*...we like younger teachers better, but they're mostly old and sometimes they just stand there with a book and say do this, do that.*

## **Students and Parents**

When probed about their relationships with their parents, and whether they discuss their schooling and learning with them, the students spoke in general terms. No major antagonisms were expressed, but neither was any real closeness elaborated. It was evident that the students did not view their parents as day-to-day support in dealing with their schooling. Again, it was as if the students thought things were more or less as they should be, not perfect, but life as parent and adolescent.

*Researcher: Can you talk openly about school and school issues with your parents?*

*Student: I personally could before, but now I get sick of it because they are always talking about VCE and my marks having to be high, and I have to go to Uni, blab blab. I'm getting sick of it*

*so I just don't talk about it anymore. For other people I dunno, it could be the same, some kids might choose not to say anything to their parents, some might, there's a variety.*

*Student: Generally we get along, but parents need to give their children more freedom and trust them more.*

*Student: Umm it depends on what relationship with their parents they have, like they could talk about everything or they could talk about barely anything. Most kids tend to keep it from their parents coz they are too scared of what the outcome will be. With my mum I tend to talk about the trouble side of school coz my dad is pretty strict. But I tend to talk to my dad about what's happening, the teachers and just things in general.*

*Student: Yeah they don't ask much about school to me but if I need help they do, and yeah it's quite fine for me to discuss things with them.*

*Student: Good. They can be annoying sometimes and pretty mean and kids don't like that. Kids don't really like being told what to do. I can talk to them about some things but not if I get in trouble or do bad in a test or something, but if I know I tried I can talk to them properly.*

## **Students and their peers**

The students were perhaps most comfortable and open speaking about their peers. All of them cited close friends as the most positive aspect of school. At the same time however, they all spoke of the stresses and negativity that characterises peer relations. In particular they spoke of the social stratification, the categorisation of students into groups, with more or less social standing. Participants were asked *In general, how do young people get along?*

*Yeah sometimes, if someone says something stupid we bag them and let them know about it, sometimes kids say stuff to other kids but not really bad stuff.*

*Yeah I guess OK. You have the groups - wogs, aussies. Yeah, some people get bagged cause they're Aussie or fat. It just happens. Maybe you could stop that but it happens all over the world.*

*It depends on what the kids like - we have the skater group and they only hang out with skaters. And you always have the nerds and the normal group. The nerds always get picked on, (laughs uncomfortably), and skaters hang with skaters. They don't think much of other people unless they know them, and the nerds are scared to talk to people, and if they are not like the others then they don't fit in, sort of thing.*

*Researcher: Who decides who's normal or a nerd and so on?*

*Student: The group and the way they dress. Like if they have money for instance, they were like Globes, or Nike, or Adidas. And if the others don't wear it then they are classed as nerds or they don't fit in. It's the same as clothes as well, if they don't wear the good ones they don't fit in.*

*Researcher: Is this fair?*

*Student: It depends, like I don't think it's fair coz every one is a human and should be treated this way. And if they don't wear the same brands and same clothes, well its stiff shit coz their parents don't earn a lot of money.*

*Well, .....nooo way. In year 10 I think we begin to show some maturity, (but not Richard). But in year 7,8 and 9 there is so much bitchiness, and the guys are all assholes. Coz the guys try to show off in front of each other, and think they are so good, just like the girls...e.g. X - bitch, and all their little gangs. If you get them by themselves they are really nice though.*

*It depends on the groups, there will be the popular kids, who think they are good and look down on everyone else. Then there will be the nerds, who only do their work and never get into trouble. There are the troublemakers who are always, stealing, graffing. It's like you see in American movies, everyone is grouped and hangs in that 'kind'.*

The students were then asked if they thought this had an impact on a student's learning experience.

*It can, like, the groups have 'expectations' and stuff, so lets say, the nerds 'have to do their work' or the rebels are always getting into trouble and disrupt the class.*

*Maybe. If something would happen to me at lunchtime and I wouldn't solve it, which has happened to me, I do get a little grumpy at mates and teachers in class and I can't really concentrate on work.*

*It can affect your learning cause if you're thinking "shit this guy hates me, and might hit me", it can get into your head and you may get scared to come to school or just worry about what's gonna happen to you, and not worry about your set tasks and work.*

*Yes it does, coz if they are not in the "in group so to speak" they sit up the front and they pretend to do work. Coz they are too scared if they do it and finish it and get better marks and stuff than the others, they will get picked on. And then coz they think they will get picked on they don't do it. And that effects their education because they are not making the most of it and wasting their parents' money.*

There were mixed responses when the students were asked whether they thought these patterns would continue through life, or whether they were just a feature of school life.

*Yeah it probably will change. It's got a lot to do with maturity and stuff, and people will realise it's sometimes good to always do your work, because it will get you ahead in life. Or it's good to have a big group of friends, or sometimes be bad, it all changes once you leave VCE I'd think, and especially once you get into the work force.*

*I think it will change once I leave school because you'll meet other people that are like you, that like the same things, are interested in the same things etc.*

*No it doesn't stop cause you see terrorist attacks and people in our society do bag people and even go the next step by hurting or even killing them, so it happens every now and then. You know it's hard to stop.*

### **Summary of Key findings in Australian context**

The MWC students feel a complete lack of ownership over their schooling experiences. The aspects of school that they do enjoy and/or appreciate are few, and are threatened by what the students resent as authoritarian and disciplinarian structures. Relations between teachers and students can be pivotal in fostering a positive learning experience, although according to students relations between the two are in the main, negative. Students feel they should have more of a say over the decisions made at school which impact on their learning. They feel they have no voice. The MWC students want to succeed at school, and value successful learning, but feel that there is a range of barriers to such successful learning occurring.

While the VSC students in Havana, Cuba, made many similar points about what constitutes a positive learning environment and felt similarly strongly about student/teacher relationships, their attitudes towards their school experiences represent almost a polar opposite to those of the MWC students. The following chapter presents the VSC data and paves the way for the comparative findings explored in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 5.

The success of the Cuban education system as measured against basic educational indicators is internationally recognised. There is much less known, however, about the attitudes of Cuban students to the education system and the schooling environment. This chapter seeks to paint a picture of school life in Cuba, as seen and experienced by the students themselves. In presenting the data collected in Cuba, it offers new and unique knowledge on the Cuban education system, and explores the dynamics of education in Cuba, and its place in Cuban society. A description of the data collection process is included, as some differences to the Australian process prove of interest and value to the research project more broadly.

### Schooling in Cuba

While on the surface Cuban classrooms appear more or less similar to ours, a closer investigation reveals fundamental differences in terms of their approach to education and to young people in society. There are students sitting at desks and teachers strolling around answering questions, but that is where the similarities end. Very quickly the dynamics of the classroom reveal a vastly different approach to learning.

The Cuban leg of this research was interested in answering the following questions.

*What do Cuban young people think about their schooling?*

*What are their attitudes towards learning?*

*What factors in their opinion contribute to a positive or negative learning experience/environment?*

Moreover, the broader social, political and economic contexts of education in Cuba were thoroughly investigated, with a view to understanding their impact and influence on Cuban students' attitudes to schooling and learning. Conscious of the problematic, but unfortunately common research approach, which sees "socialist" or "communist" governments considered *en bloc* despite the fact that they are in reality a very diverse group of nations, this study was interested in understanding the complexities of the specifically Cuban experience. This chapter explores not only the structure and role of education in

Cuba's planned, socialist economy, but also the political, ideological and social interplay of daily life.

### **The Vedado Secondary College Students**

Vedado Secondary College (VSC) was selected in the first instance, through a family contact of the researcher. Preliminary investigations suggested that VSC was more or less representative of a typical secondary school in Havana, and so it was confirmed as the participating school with the assistance of a Cuban colleague. Rosa Maria Masson Cruz, lecturer, assessor and head of department in the Pedagogical Sciences faculty of the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Jose Verona in Havana, is also a specialist in comparative education. Jose Verona is the main teacher-training institute in Havana. Rosa was contacted in preparation for the study and was able to provide professional support, information and assistance in arranging the technicalities of the school visits and meetings with students. Marita, a teacher at VSC, and also one of the student welfare coordinators, asked for student volunteers from the Year 9 level. The fact that the school was initially chosen, not through official communication with the Cuban Education Department, but through informal channels, strengthens the claim that it was essentially a random selection of students.

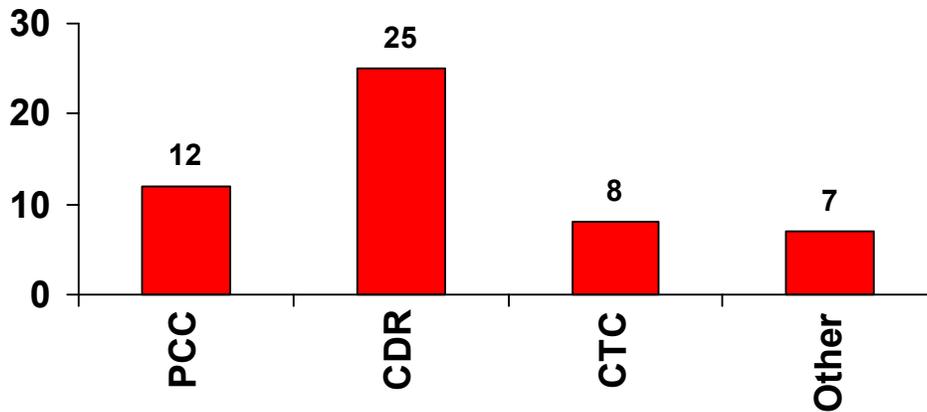
The 20 students who volunteered to participate were all at the end of their 9<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school. As Cuba's school system is structured similar to that of the United States, Year 9 is the last year of middle high school, with students attending senior (pre-university) and more specialised secondary schools for years 10, 11 and 12. In this sense, it is a similar period both in age and in level of schooling for students in Australia in Year 10.

According to Marita, the students were varied in their "academic" abilities. Subsequent discussions and reading of the cases suggested that this was more or less the case. They were from a range of different friendship based groups and their parents varied from professionals to cleaners. Some of their parents were members of the Cuban Communist Party (23%, see Figure 10), while others had no direct links to the political establishment. In this regard, it is important to note that in Cuban society a far greater portion of the population is engaged in the direct practice of government, so unlike in Australia a very high number of young people would have family who work in government functions.

Furthermore, far greater numbers of people in general are involved in political, trade union and community organisations in Cuba than in Australia. This high level engagement amongst the population in social and political life is significant to this study, and further explored in Chapter 6. It should also be noted that the comparatively high number of tertiary educated parents in the Cuban sample is reflective of the fact that Cuba in general is a very highly educated population. In 2002 14% of all Cuban workers had a professional degree (Uriarte, 2002). This statistic is not entirely indicative of the situation in Havana given that Cuba has a much larger rural and regional population, than by comparison Australia, resulting in an even higher number of tertiary educated adults in major cities in urban Cuba. Broader reflections on the provision of and philosophical roots of the education system in Cuba are made throughout this thesis, however this comparison is important to note here in terms of differences between the two samples.

While the students participated voluntarily, it appears that they were generally representative of a cross-section of student types, and that the teacher responsible for liaison (Marita) made every effort to encourage a variety of students to participate. Furthermore, the comfort and interest of each student in the project, was assumed to indicate a voluntary willingness, and suggests that the sample was genuinely random rather than school-selected.

**Figure 10. Parent membership of organisations - Cuba**



PCC = Cuban Communist Party

CDR = Committees for the Defence of the Revolution

CTC = Cuban Confederation of Workers

Other = includes other Trade Unions and professional associations

\*NOTE: Some parents were members of more than one organisation.

### **The Data Collection**

In discussing research with students, Cullingford (2002, pg. 23) refers to the problematic question of the relationship between researcher and student. Although it was expected that an unknown foreign researcher would make an ideal relationship difficult, the general openness of Cuban society and the confidence apparent among young people meant that the Cuban students were very active in their participation. With the assistance of the introduction and explanation given by their teacher, there was no obvious mistrust of the *extranjera*, or non-Cuban researcher, but rather an active interest in the project.

As the research process continued it became clear that the Cuban students were experienced and confident in giving their opinions and accustomed to discussing issues with adults in a reciprocal and collaborative manner. Frank and even philosophical discussions about their lives, their opinions and their experiences were not unusual but rather common occurrences. A concern that the presence of one of the VSC teachers in

the initial meetings would influence or hinder students' comments also seemed unfounded. This was the first example of a very open and positive student/teacher relationship reflected on in much more detail throughout this chapter.

VSC was impressively accommodating in organising the research. Despite the students being in the middle of exams, a range of meetings and visits were held over a month long period with no hesitations. Marita as well as Rosa Maria and the researcher attended the first two. However, only the researcher, interpreting assistant and students attended the remainder.

One point worth discussing in an introduction to the presentation of data is the descriptive and emotional manner in which Cuban young people speak. While it could be suggested that the Spanish language is inherently more animated, the Cuban students also manifest a lengthy historical tradition of self-empowerment that reflects in the national psyche.

It's been affirmed historically that among the qualities of Cubans one finds...expressiveness, vivacity, excessive gesticulation when speaking, facility for the establishment of interpersonal relationships, astuteness, disposition to amusement, capacity to improvise, arrogance and strong national character (Robledo 1999, pg. 256-257).

The Cubans suggest that this is the result of a "national history of rebellion." (Robledo 1999, pg. 257) The VSC students invariably presented their ideas in a passionate and expressive way. Repeated probing and different approaches to questions revealed a deep understanding and sincerity in the students' comments and refuted any concerns regarding the broad representativeness of the sample group.

Time restraints dictated a pre-planned difference in the methodology for the Cuban setting. As noted in Chapter 3, the topics for the two cases were more or less prescribed, rather than being discussed collaboratively as they were with the Australian sample. This resulted in the data from the written cases being much more easily compared across the two settings.

In general, the Cuban research underwent a very similar methodological evolution to the Australian setting albeit for different reasons. The Cuban students' confidence to generalise and abstract, meant that their initial cases presented ideas in a very universal or 'finished' way. While useful in preparing the interpretative case and in painting a picture of school in Cuba, these cases did not really capture the specificities and detail of individual attitudes and experiences. As in Australia, the use of interviews was expanded to enable a more thorough and rounded investigation of the students' attitudes.

### **Education – the Cuban context**

As outlined in the literature review, Cuban education is contextualised by social organisation that emphasises the democracy of participation rather than the model of democracy based on citizen ratification of decisions already made. The Cuban citizen is educated to participate in and contribute to every aspect of economy and politics. Technical knowledge is highly valued, especially due to the development needs of the country, but also tightly integrated with the education of citizens capable of participating in socio-political goal setting.

MacDonald, in comparing pre and post-revolutionary education policy states that

Education was perceived by the revolutionary leadership as being either a force for economic stagnation and destruction of morale (as it was before the revolution) or as a force for social change. That is, education fulfilled its role in pre-Revolutionary Cuban society by supporting the class structure and by inculcating habits of privatism and competition for personal gain at the expense of others; it was a force for alienation. Revolutionary education, on the other hand, had to manifest itself as a force for integration (or disalienation) (MacDonald 1985, pg. 21).

This culture of participation is reflected in young people understanding themselves as active agents in forming ideas, opinions and individual goals.

## Defining learning

The VSC students appear to treat learning as a defining aspect of life, an end in itself rather than a simple means to an end. They recognised learning as something that takes place both inside and outside of the school environment, and gave examples of where and how learning occurs.

*In life! At home, museums, communication, free time, aquariums, everywhere!*

*Cuban television, we have the education channel, with documentaries, La Universidad por Todos<sup>9</sup>.*

*La Universidad por Todos is excellent, especially for everyone who didn't get the opportunities in the past. It has segments on cinema, history, music, eating vegetables, languages, geography, mathematics, the history of Spanish etc..*

*With our friends, our peers, study groups, amongst ourselves, and in discussions and debates with our families.*

This sense of education as a defining feature of a fulfilling life instead of a burden imposed by employment requirements and issues of status is deeply ingrained in Cuban traditions. The Cuban population has had to struggle for its sovereignty for over a century, in the process they have built a culture of defiant self-confidence and leadership. Studies of Cuban history explain these revolutionary traditions and how greatly they value the currency of education (Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000, pg. 9-19). The most important weapon of the Cuban people in their struggles for self-determination has always been their ability to organise themselves collectively in community, whether as communities of opposition or communities of governance (Brigos 1998).

The Cuban population has learnt how to put education into use as part of economic and political planning, replacing the role of the market with informed and participatory decision-making. This elevates education to the centre of social organisation not just in a functional sense but also in terms of social-goal setting and the deliberate development of social visions.

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<sup>9</sup> The University for All is a Cuban government initiative involving a range of educational programs broadcast on Cuban TV, and accompanied by a range of broadsheets virtually free of cost. Its aim is to further broaden the opportunities for learning amongst Cubans, especially adults and elderly people who did not have the advantage of Cuba's current free education system. Subjects presented are extremely diverse,

Education in the context of socialism is the task of all organisms and all situations, education from radio, from television, through newspapers and magazines ... in books and in life. Education is like a grand symphony where the people are not simply the audience, samplers of the rhythm and harmony, but rather protagonist and conductor of the immense social orchestra (García Galló, cited in Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000, pg. 16).

In such a context, it was not surprising that the participants valued education in an intrinsic sense. In the main, they did not refer to education in terms of achieving 'something else' but rather as part of what they aim to achieve. Learning was seen as part of constructing and re-constructing their whole individual and social setting. As López notes

- Education is everyone's task, which is preceded by Marti's maxim that, upon coming onto this earth, every person has the right to be educated and later, in payment, the duty to contribute to the education of the rest.
- The second important aspect is in the Cuban concept of "equality of opportunity;" where not only must equality exist in order to receive, but also in order to give, and this has a profound educative significance (López 1999, pg. 185-186).

### **Learning is a positive experience.**

The VSC students spoke of their learning experiences with great excitement and passion. They spoke even lovingly of their school and their time spent learning. The first written case, which asked students to describe a positive learning experience, revealed that learning is valued immensely and that they are conscious of the broader social and political implications of learning.

*With the fortune to know that you have the possibility to study, it's impossible to feel anything other than happiness, satisfaction, delight and at the same time of the achievement for our people to make ourselves the future.*

*Speaking of learning, to feel to be learning, to understand an exercise and to be capable of completing it with your own skills, is incomparable. It's an immense happiness to be able to discover each time a greater world of understanding, unknown up until that moment.*

One recurring emphasis in the students' responses was their understanding of their time spent as students. They stressed that their only responsibility as young people was to learn, and to develop their individual abilities to enable them to participate fully, actively and consciously in the future, in all facets of Cuban life. One example is that none of the VSC students worked. The data suggest a link between the general levels of motivation among Cuban students and the lack of apparent pressures on them outside of their schooling.

The students approached the questions philosophically and with an impressive level of seriousness and thoughtfulness. The students reflected on the type of education required and its purpose and/or usefulness.

*When one learns, one feels like something that is renovated, since you then have in your mind some new and interesting knowledge. Some come to the realisation that afterwards you will be able to use this knowledge for good and to assist the people around you.*

The Cuban students appeared to have a deeply philosophical understanding of education, as part of the *formation* of humankind. This seems to reflect the exposure Cuban students have to global realities, general history and philosophical thought (Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000; Zocolsky 1985).

After expressing their passion for learning in great detail, the students were also keen to emphasise the effects of a negative learning experience.

*But, how different it is to not understand anything, it's like you're blockaded, when there are no possibilities for me to explain, or when it has to be done in a way that I don't understand, and I remain blank, I actually feel bad. I feel useless.*

*If you go to school and don't learn something new you feel sad, and like you're thrown to the side. When I don't learn something new, I feel sad and like I've been fraudado <sup>10</sup>, since I can't demonstrate that I learnt something new in school. Some feel as if they were an object. So, the school converts into a monotonous weight, and that's when the students begin to fail, since the school isn't teaching them anything new and is transformed into the house of boredom. We the students, don't feel the same motivation and we feel bad that we're not able to show the world what we're learning.*

When asked to give examples of such experiences the students explained that they were speaking generally about what it would be like to be learning, rather than commenting on encounters in their own schooling. By and large they said, these experiences were not common in Cuba, i.e. they were hypothesising about the impact of not learning on a young person.

Later when asked for their thoughts on why some students may not be motivated in class, they elaborated on this theme further.

*They get distracted because the class isn't interesting enough, or because some students aren't mature enough. Maybe they don't have motivation because they don't understand the social responsibility to study, or maybe their families don't talk to them about the importance of studies. Sometimes the relationship between teachers and students helps this and problems are overcome, sometimes it's not great, it is a psychological question also.*

*Class topics need to be interesting*

The VSC students agreed that not learning anything new impacts on student motivation.

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<sup>10</sup> Fraudado literally translates as frauded.

## **The political economy of schooling**

The example of Vedado Secondary College is illuminating in discussing how the commonly used sociological term socio-economic status can be applied to Cuba, and also important in establishing the representativeness of VSC as a 'typical' Cuban school.

The sociological concept of Socio-economic-status (SES) cannot be applied to Cuba in the same way that it is in Australia for example. While in recent years social inequality has risen in Cuba, as a result of government policies increasing foreign investment and promoting the circulation of US dollars, this has not affected educational opportunities (Muruaga, Gutiérrez et al. 1998, pg. 115).

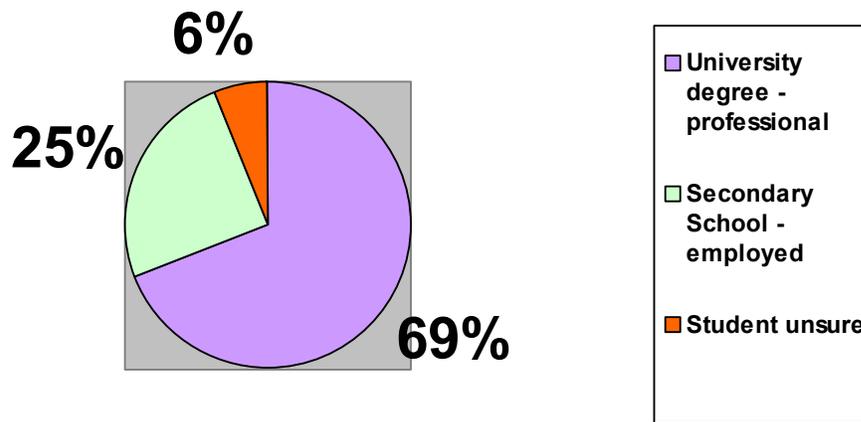
Social inequality in Cuba is reflected mostly in the dollar economy, which predominates in non-basic goods in shortage due to the economic blockade and the country's dependence on the industrialised West (Ruiz 1998). Where basic goods and services such as education are affected by shortage, this is dealt with by centralised government rationing. In the food sector this takes the form of a provision booklet (Espin 1991, pg. 11-12), in education it means the egalitarian distribution of resources regardless of school location or specialisation (Muruaga, Gutiérrez et al. 1998, pg. 115-145).

The system precludes the possibility of affording a "better education" or a place at a "better school" with more resources and higher prestige. Schooling in Cuba is uniform, entirely public and free for all Cubans to the tertiary level. More money does not lead to academic advantage. That said there do exist some differences between schools in the countryside and the big cities, in terms of opportunities and resources. However they are surprisingly few and there is an ongoing priority on and commitment to eradicating these differences (Muruaga, Gutiérrez et al. 1998, pg. 115-145). The social, economic and political factors which are identified in reports uncovering systematic cycles of advantage and disadvantage in education, (Teese and Polesel 2003; Hill and Cole 2001c; Marginson 1997a), for example income, geographical location, ethnicity, indigenous background, etc. have been almost entirely eradicated.

There are historical reasons why some suburbs continue to be better resourced in general, i.e. better housing, with more parks etc., but this does not translate to a potentially better

education, in the context of a nationally uniform system. VSC was before the revolution in 1959 an extremely wealthy catholic school, only open to the children of the Cuban elite. The daughters of the previous Cuban president attended. Today it is open to all students who live in the immediate area. Given the social or class make up of the suburb, most residents fled Cuba immediately after the revolution, and so now it is home to a much more diverse group of people. Including for example many of the families of the domestic staff employed by the former residents, who were given house titles to the homes of their previous employers. Figure 11 shows the educational levels and employment of the parents/guardians of the VSC students.

**Figure 11. Parent/guardian education and employment - Cuba**



### Young people and work

None of the VSC students were involved in paid work. They explained that there was no economic compulsion for young people to work. The cash economy in Cuba plays a very different role, as all necessities are covered by the state. Money in Cuba is used for the purposes of buying extras in terms of basic goods and luxury items. Cuba has all the characteristics of a dependent economy but also the added burden of a 40 year long economic blockade by the US, its natural particularly in a geographical sense trading partner. Due especially to this blockade, goods that are considered luxuries such as cars, cable TV, Sony Play stations etc., are in such short supply that their prices are very prohibitive for all but those Cubans receiving dollars from family abroad. This means that the idea of 'pocket money' for young people is rather meaningless unless it can be earned in \$US. All commonly used goods, services and forms of culture and leisure are more or

less freely accessible. In other words, young people have no financial difficulties in accessing sporting events, cinema, theatre etc. Conversely, buying an MP3 player is almost completely out of the question.

*There are many cultural activities we can participate in, like for example at the moment Cuba Disco<sup>11</sup>. Moreover we can afford everything, as all of these activities cost very little for Cubans, not like in Argentina for example where even the so called middle classes can't afford to buy CD's or go to see a movie, a movie costs US\$15 in Argentina<sup>12</sup> and 2 pesos in Cuba.*

While in most countries around the world, young people constitute the perfect market for innumerable consumer goods, everything from clothing to computer games and footwear (Giroux 2000), this is not the case in Cuba. Young people are not subjected to commercial advertising, and consequently their attitudes to leisure, culture and life-goals seem not to be centred on the ownership and display of consumer goods. That said, Cuba is not completely isolated from the influences of the world market. Most young people would have friends that have access to cable TV, or have it themselves, e.g. and all the students interviewed demonstrated a high level of awareness of youth culture internationally.

Generally speaking an awareness of the lack of consumer goods in Cuba is part of a resentment which does exist amongst Cuban young people, and which the government and the Union of Young Communists (UJC) are seeking to address through a range of programs aimed at young people. Recommendations being implemented include those of the Centre of Youth Studies 1999, which focus on decentralisation and participation in regards to youth programs and social role. This is discussed later in this chapter in more detail.

The participants at VSC however, reflected the following perspective.

*...although they are often attractive things and of course we would like them, they are not more important than the things our government spends money on, for example health and education, and certainly not as important as defending the Cuban people's sovereign rights.*

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<sup>11</sup> A big exhibition and festival of Cuban music and musical recordings.

<sup>12</sup> This comment is taken from an interview conducted with a student who had visited Argentina in 2001 in the context of an economic crisis.

*In any case, these things are only available to some in the US, only the few who can afford them, and making money from such extras is a priority at the expense of the living standards of the majority of US citizens.*

Awareness of such micro and macro political issues amongst the VSC students was impressive, particularly in relation to themselves as youth. They saw the lure of commercial goods as a con, something they were able to resist intelligently and collectively. Fostering such an understanding and awareness was a central aim of the program introduced by MINED in 1999 which emphasised civic values (Fabelo and Toruncha 1999; Robledo 1999).

Young people's employment ambitions seem to centre on personal development rather than accumulation of money and status. Students frequently talked about doing jobs in areas they loved, rather than for any financial reasons. In turn personal development was defined by contribution to community. The most outstanding intervention of the state in education is its emphasis of the value of human co-operation (Martí 1999, pg. 95-104). This determines a different context for student employment choices. Students tend to prioritise education from the perspective of "what your education will enable you to do for others", or in other words the community.

All the students interviewed in the Cuban sample demonstrated great individual passion about their ideas and interests. They also invariably talked of their interests as non-distinct to their possible careers. Those who liked ancient history talked of being archaeologists, those passionate about sport talked of being sports people, and those who loved science talked about being scientists.

For example the following responses were given to a question about the future, and possible careers for the students.

*...maybe one day I'd like to visit Egypt? We're fanatics about ancient history, archaeology, anthropology etc.*

*Only roughly speaking, because at this point I don't really know, we are only 14 years old, I am interested in many things, maybe theatre or something in the arts, that is my passion.*

## **Volunteer Work**

In part, students' appreciation of the social value of work is developed through their experiences with volunteer work throughout school life. While voluntary, most students participate in a range of tasks, organised through the Pioneros (OPJM) and later the Federation of Middle High School Students (FEEM), both within and outside the school, but as part of their overall schooling experience.

*As part of OPJM... (we do) all sorts of volunteer work, like gathering primary materials for work, cleaning the school, repairing books, cover/protect books and notepads, clean the school... this is very important to us, work makes us as people, as Jose Marti said, "work forges the human being", any sort of work we do in the future, we will still have to work to be able to live...we have shifts at school to do work, like we water the plants, look after the garden...*

*When things like the dengue plague happen, things of national importance, we mobilise the whole pioneers organisation, among others, through our departmental pioneer reps, teachers etc*

*It's voluntary, but the big majority of students participate...For example in June, it's the month of the cyclones, so we get ready for that, we help with the preparations...students from 8<sup>th</sup> grade up help out with this...but like other work it's volunteers... We also look after the community around the school, cleaning, painting and so on.*

In explaining the importance of the volunteer work the students highlight their sense of belonging within the broader community, and also their sense of ownership over the school.

*...we help out because it's the community we are a part of, we live and share with these people...*

*Yeah we help out because it's very important, but not only because it's important but because it's our school and we are interested in what happens to it, we have to fix it ourselves, maintain it ourselves, clean it ourselves.*

These experiences are further consolidated through the students' involvement alongside other members of the community in the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, discussed later in this Chapter.

## **Resources**

*(our) text books... are almost all second hand, deteriorated, they have notes on them. Sometimes there are fights over new books (students laugh), but the situation is difficult with the economy.*

Cuba's economic status warrants the description of a poor third world or dependent country. As with all sectors, the education sector in Cuba has suffered as a result of the economic blockade imposed by the United States more than 40 years ago. In the context of discussing the ideal school, all of the Cuban participants cited new resources as important. When probed they identified a range of basic educational resources.

The students use and re-use exercise books a number of times, and are constantly involved in re-binding and repairing well used text books. It certainly appears to be the case that a lack of paper in general, as well as a commitment to more collaborative and diverse learning results in a stronger emphasis on students' work being oral. Computers and information technology in general, despite a priority on upgrading access to all schools and developing skills in this area (Castro 2003), are absurdly limited given the international context of a computer driven, technological world.

The students noted that good resources are important to learning. At the same time, they recognised other aspects as more important, for example teachers and dynamic lessons. Moreover, they explained why there were so few resources in Cuba, and why it was therefore important for them to respect the ones they do have. Certainly limited resources, while a recognised problem, do not interfere with students achieving internationally recognised academic results. This fact has not gone unnoticed in international comparisons of educational outcomes.

## Education Reform

Armando Hart, the first Minister of Education after the 1959 revolution firmly established the concept of and context for educational change and development.

Society is not static; the essence of life is change. The school as an organ of society must be disposed also to following the rhythm of social transformations, if it does not want to become an element of social regress...when the teacher is incapable of feeling the rhythm of life as it changes, when norms are dictated aloof from the social goals of the times, the educational institution is converted into a deadly weight and even an obstacle to progress (Armando Hart in *Educational Message to the People*, cited in (Hurtado, Rodriguez, Garcés, Boronat, Aguilera and Céspedes 1996, pg. 17).

As the literature review noted, policy changes in Cuba over the past 45 years have commonly gone against international trends in educational planning and development. Moreover, the changes have been developed and implemented with the democratic involvement of the vast majority of Cuban teachers, and in most cases students.

Although the professional development of teachers, and their involvement in action research projects is expanded later in the chapter, one interesting practical feature of education in Cuba which facilitates such things is worth mentioning here. The significant expansion of education after the revolution of 1959, “required an unprecedented marshalling of resources, including the appropriation of military facilities for schools.” (Lutjens 2000, pg. 3) After the 1959 revolution Fidel Castro ordered that all of Cuba’s massive military complexes be closed immediately and re-opened as educational communities. These exist throughout Cuba today, and in the case of *La Ciudad de Libertad*<sup>13</sup> in Havana, house a higher pedagogical institute, a number of pre-university colleges, a number of secondary schools, primary schools and infant centres, in expansive tree filled grounds.

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<sup>13</sup> The City of Liberty

This close physical proximity enables and indeed fosters on a practical level, close collaboration and interchange between the teaching staff in schools and the academics in the pedagogical institute. Such an environment facilitates an effectively constant cycle of research involving academics, teachers, trainee teachers and in many cases students. As Lutjens notes, the research is very broad, reaching from "...curricular and organisational reform at the university level to the extracurricular activity of the Pioneros." (Lutjens 2000, pg. 6) Change in education policy is something therefore that involves and motivates all of the main actors, and is both influenced and shaped as well as implemented by all actors.

The intrinsic nature of change in the Cuban education system is encapsulated by the campaign approach to reform, defined by the involvement of all education actors throughout the entire process and not just at the end. Policy is developed through intensive and inclusive community consultation and debate. Opinions are drawn into the campaign of reform and tested in practice. This places research in collective hands. Perfeccionamiento provided a good example.

The openness of the system is testified to by its apparent capacity for philosophical re-appraisal. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Cuban education undertook a complete re-examination of its pedagogical traditions, re-discovering its own history. This re-discovery was tied to a renewed effort to democratise the educational institution – emphasising greater decentralisation, greater local responsibility and autonomy for schools, with regard to course materials, teacher evaluation, schedules etc (Lutjens 2000; López 1999). Importantly many self-criticisms were made, and a thorough discussion about both the positive and negative influences of Soviet pedagogy in Cuba education. Discussing education reform in an essay titled *Education and Development. Cuba, Challenges for the Second Millennium*, López asserts that

The school must redefine, in these moments, the forms and procedures; with them it achieves the traits of a rounded personality necessary in the socialist person, a value that has not been renounced in a world where the need to be competitive can unwittingly lead to pragmatic teaching. These new forms and procedures will have to be stripped of the formalism inherited from Soviet pedagogy – not only in official pronouncements and in the intentions of the educational system but also, in the own minds of the teachers and professors. Influence of Soviet pedagogy gave

rise to children using slogans without knowing the real content of the aspirations they advocated. Certainly, this framework is not exclusively the school's responsibility, but also that of the youth and mass organisations which assist in the formation of new generations (López 1999, pg. 200-201).

### **Schooling as counter-ideology**

The Cuban revolution considers education as a counter-ideological forum. There is a specific critique of education in capitalist society as the reinforcement of unseen prejudices and values, or ideology. Education in Cuba is considered as a forum to critique these ideological foundations, and through which to develop socio-economic and moral alternatives (Guevara 2003).

The influence of Spanish colonialism in Cuba's history remains evident in Cuba's schools. Lutjens notes that "...some have described Cuban educational traditions as European and argued that developmental necessities explain more than ideology." (Lutjens 2000, pg. 12) In reality, it is a combination of both and their interrelationship as shaped by the theoretical perspectives of key figures with Cuba's revolutionary traditions. Both the independence leader José Martí and the revolutionary figure of Ernesto Che Guevara placed a 'pedagogy of the oppressed' at the heart of their political strategies.

There is nothing especially unique about the politicisation of the Cuban education system. As MacDonald asserts

The various state schooling systems throughout the world were all conceived out of pragmatic political necessity. Their main function in any society is to enhance the survival of the values implicit in the social system concerned. No nation or state, whatever its political orientation, will put the bulk of its citizenry through a system which does not legitimate its own social and political ethics, and hence its very survival (MacDonald 1985, pg. 28).

What is unique is the open character of this in Cuban schooling, in other words the contest of ideologies which is promoted.

## **Educational content**

In many ways the curricular content of Cuban classes is similar to most other countries. Primary and lower secondary students study “language, arts and expression, mathematics, social studies, science and health and safety, and technical and vocational training in such subjects as handicrafts, sewing, and home economics.” (National Office of Overseas Skill Recognition, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs 2000a, pg. 5) Lower secondary students also learn English, agriculture and participation in a civics program.

Delivery in general appears dynamic and aimed at challenging the students. Contemporary classrooms reflect the changes outlined earlier in relation to a developing view of Cuban pedagogical philosophy. Content is commonly posed in the form of questions, of problems to be solved. In this sense Cuban teachers are routinely employing strategies which have newly been embraced on a theoretical level and not yet on a practical level elsewhere in the world.

The emphasis on connecting all of these areas of study to deliver a holistic, integrated and historical education is more uniquely Cuban. While a cross-curricular approach is already evident a new initiative is currently being discussed which involves reforming the entire Year 7-9 program. In recognition of the limitations of a segregated curriculum in providing such an integrated education, and based on comments made by Fidel Castro, reforms are being developed which will see students with fewer classes and fewer teachers.

The reforms are motivated by other observations made by Cuban teachers and educational academics. It has been suggested that the argument for specialisation, the main reason behind the change from the generalist primary approach to the segregated approach of early secondary education, is flawed. The assertion is that students rarely develop genuine specialised knowledge in any subject area until pre-university or upper secondary level education. Furthermore, such specialised knowledge is not necessary at that stage, provided a solid understanding of the basics of the subject area is developed. The reforms aim to remove the unnecessary breaking-up of subject matter, and concentrate on developing the students’ knowledge and skills in a rounded and integrated manner.

Educationalists are also taking up such themes in Victoria with the new Victorian curriculum, *The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)* which recognise three broad stages of learning.

- Prep to Year 4 (laying the foundations), where the curriculum focuses on developing the fundamental knowledge, skills and behaviours in literacy and numeracy and basic physical and social capacities which underpin all future learning; to
- Years 5 to 8 (building breadth and depth), where students progress beyond the foundations, their literacy and numeracy becomes more sophisticated, and important discipline-based and interdisciplinary capacities are progressively introduced; to
- Years 9 and 10 (developing pathways), which constitute a bridge to the post-compulsory years and where students begin to focus more clearly on areas of particular interest related to both their future schooling and intended pathways beyond school while developing their understanding of, and connection to, the community in which they live (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005b).

Also motivating the reforms in Cuba is the recognition that Years 7 to 9 are challenging in any case for young adolescents, and that fewer teachers will lead to stronger relationships and a more secure and supportive learning environment. At present these reforms are being developed alongside changes to the training of secondary teachers. Depending on the exact nature of the new program, teachers will be further trained in generalist studies, as well as their particular subject area, and a greater emphasis will be placed on team-teaching and a cross-curricular approach.

### **Teachers and Learning**

When considering the ideal school, all of the Cuban participants suggested that teachers are the most important factor in creating a positive learning experience. Schoolteachers in Cuba are greatly respected and hold a position of esteem in society perhaps only equalled by doctors, and concurrent with the traditions of self-empowerment previously mentioned. All of the Cuban students and their families emphasised the commitment and dedication of

the VSC teachers and how integral they are to each students' development. They were all considered to be highly skilled professionals and furthermore, very important people to the students personally as well as academically.

*(Good teachers) ...use language that students can understand, and they use different mediums, e.g. sometimes we go to the park to do a class, a "spontaneous class" is always better.*

*Their classes are more creative, "doing" not "talking", for example with the picture of Mella,<sup>14</sup> don't just hold up a picture of him we want to understand his life.*

The students believe that a creative and varied teaching approach enhances learning, and cited creativity and dynamism as important qualities of a good teacher. More dynamic and interesting lessons made learning easier and more enjoyable. More active, hands-on lessons also generated more interest and better enabled the students to grasp new concepts.

According to the students these experiences are common to the majority of their classes.

*We learn best in a modern, dynamic and reflexive classroom. When teachers use real examples.*

*Classes are always better when they involve curiosities, for example the day we had to bring along curiosities or novelties to class to discuss.*

*Or like the competition in Spanish class.*

*You learn better this way, as opposed to with monotonies, we prefer to do exercises and not just learn the technical basics, exercises that are attached to practical situations.*

*Biology is a good example, with use of visuals and practical exercises.*

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<sup>14</sup> Julio Antonio Mella was one of the founders of Cuba's first communist party, and is studied by students in Cuban history classes.

## Relationships

While the form and delivery of classes were well discussed by students in expanding on the notion of a good teacher, they placed an emphasis on personal relationships and their absolute centrality to a positive learning experience.

Students consider teacher/student rapport critical. To the point that they seemed almost unable to fathom a situation where students and teachers did not get along. The respect that the students have for their teachers is based on the belief that the teachers care, are interested in their studies and work very hard and selflessly for the students and their futures. The experiences that lead students to be confident of these things are approachable teachers, teachers who demonstrate a willingness to assist any and all students should they require help, and teachers who trust students.

*I feel very good with my teachers. My relationship with them is magnificent, some of them are like my friends. Whatever doubt, or whatever problem I have, they'll comment without a problem.*

*...they trust in students*

*They're supportive and helpful, our teachers always visit the houses of students and know their families, the students can approach them and vice versa, the teachers ask them how things are going, they show *companerismo*<sup>15</sup>.*

*There is the example of our teacher, she brought an exam to the hospital of a sick student, and then our whole class decided to take the class to the hospital, so we all went to see him.*

The strong and meaningful relationship that the students have with their teachers is fostered in a school environment where authority has to be earned and is not established by hierarchy. The social right and responsibility of students to learn is as valued as the responsibility of teachers to facilitate such learning. Students are respected as equal participants in the process and as active actors with something to contribute. This is reflected in the organisational set-up of schools, with there being no space off limits to

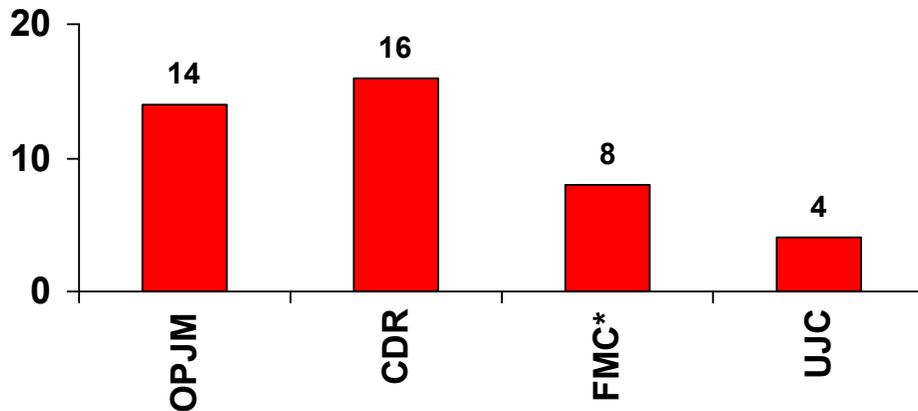
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<sup>15</sup> Literally translates as 'brother or sisterhood' or fraternalism, and signifies a mutually respectful and loving relationship, based on an equal and reciprocal understanding.

either group. However it is most clearly fostered through the democratic nature of Cuban schools, where students are able to genuinely participate in the decision-making processes which affect their education. The democracy in schools also impacts greatly on student motivation and engagement, with the main requirement of such a hierarchy in schools, that of disciplining the students, almost wholly unnecessary.

Connected to the experience of schooling in Cuba are the mass organisations which although voluntary, involve the vast majority of Cuban youth. The VSC students' membership to such organisations is shown in Figure 12 which notes the total number of students who identified as members of each organisation, from the sample of 20. The Pioneros or The Organised Pioneer Movement of Jose Marti (OPJM) represent students from Grades 1 through 9. Membership of the FEEM (Federation of Middle High School Students) is open to all secondary students. Students from Year 9 onwards can also elect to join the UJC (Union of Young Communists). These organisations, while completely independent provide school students with opportunities to directly participate in and impact on the education system in general. For example once a month, Pionero members in each individual class in every Cuban secondary school hold a meeting, directed by the elected class student representative. These meetings discuss and vote on everything from the food offered for lunch in a school, to the way a particular unit of work has been presented by the teacher. The decisions and outcomes of these meetings must then be addressed by the teaching staff, and form the basis of much change at the local school level - a point the students are keen to emphasise.

**Figure 12. Student membership of organisations - Cuba**



\* Members of the FMC out of 9 female students in total.

All of the aforementioned mass organisations also have regular delegated congresses at a national level. Any educational proposals that arise from these discussions are taken directly to parliament and the ministry of education. It is clear that the students take these meetings and their role in them very seriously, and feel that their voices are recognised as important not only in theory but in practice.

### **Teachers and community**

Another important aspect of why the students and teachers enjoy such a close relationship is that it also exists outside of the boundaries of school. All the students know their teachers in another capacity, most commonly as fellow participants in the suburb based Committee's for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR's). The CDR's exist in every suburb and involve the majority of the adult population in voluntary activity. At the age of 14 young people are officially able to become members of the CDR's and participate in all of their activities, although in reality they are involved in the activities of the community throughout their childhood.

Two of the students described the CDR's and their involvement in them as follows.

*...the CDR's ... surged from the idea that the people themselves had to defend their gains, the revolution, and their country...this can mean making war but also organising people at the neighbourhood level, organising festivities, to organise events for days like mothers and fathers days... They exist in each suburb, almost every block, they participate in many things, as part of defending the revolution. They involve mothers and fathers...*

*They also organise neighbourhood guards, to supplement the role of the police, they also organise the defence and cleanliness of each block/suburb. Also e.g. they participate and organise people to participate in marches, like May Day, another task is to participate sometimes in Mesa Redonda...<sup>16</sup>*

In other cases the students know the teachers as neighbours, friends of the family, sporting coaches or teammates etc. Communicating and relating to each other in this way outside of the classroom normalises the relationship between teacher and student at school, and denies misunderstandings about the motivations and/or experiences of each.

Beyond their usual contact with students' parents as fellow citizens, teachers strive to involve parents in their children's education. It is completely normal for teachers to visit students in their homes, to discuss not only school-related issues, but also life in general. This reflects part of an ongoing commitment to involve the family in the education process and to enable and encourage them to understand all aspects of the students' lives as individuals.

### **Exchange in the classroom**

In the classroom, the extension of such a relationship between students and teachers is a reciprocal and collaborative learning environment. Students spoke excitedly about the 'exchange of ideas' in their classroom.

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<sup>16</sup> Mesa Redonda means Round Table. These are public events held regularly in Cuba and broadcast on Cuban Television. In the form of a round table discussion, they discuss and analyse issues/debates of contemporary interest to Cuba and internationally, and involve a range of people each time – including government officials, political leaders, journalists, academics, Trade and Student Union leaders, workers, students and ordinary citizens.

*Good teachers are interested in an exchange with students, they get the students opinions, it's like a group of musicians – they will always sound better if they are not just a leader with musicians – but a true collective.*

*The world would not be the world if everyone thought the same, everyone has something to contribute to a rich discussion, students and teachers alike.*

*It is a cycle of learning between teachers and students, good teachers are teachers who say they learn from students, teachers who encourage you to learn because you want to not just because you need to.*

The students' ability and motivation to engage in such an exchange is cultivated not only through the methods of teachers in the classrooms themselves, but also through their active and meaningful participation in school decision making and school life in general. While this is elaborated throughout this chapter, it is worth stressing here that the whole school experience combines to develop the skills and propensity which enable the Cuban students to enjoy successful learning experiences as they do.

## **Teaching in Cuba**

An important aspect of this of course, is the Cuban teachers themselves. It is likely that many of the ways in which teachers are trained and supported, as well as their teaching environment are more or less unique to Cuba.

Teachers in Cuba choose their profession very early, either in primary school or early secondary school. Despite an increasing interest amongst young people in the tourism and Information Technology sectors, with their opportunity for greater income, teaching is still a popular and very highly respected career for a young person to choose. A teacher in Cuba earns roughly 500 Cuban pesos a month, which equates to roughly US\$20.<sup>17</sup> According to Rosa Maria Masson Cruz, teacher and academic wages, as with all wages, dropped

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<sup>17</sup> When considering wages in Cuba a range of factors must be taken into account. All wage earners receive, above their monthly wage, the following social provisions; most food and basic household needs in the form of a provision booklet (roughly 75%), and free and complete education and health care. All food and household goods required above the provision booklet are available at heavily subsidised prices. In the vast majority of cases Cubans do not pay rent, and are given a cultural subsidy each month in the form of free

dramatically at the onset of The Special Period. Life was comfortable but is now difficult, despite improvements since the depth of the economic crisis leading to The Special Period. Teachers get a slightly higher wage than average in Cuba, but no wages are significantly higher, for e.g. the special military forces only receive about 550 pesos a month as the highest paid section of the workforce.

The decision to become a teacher appears to be motivated by a strong social commitment to education, as well as a personal and emotional interest, and motivation. Soon after the 1959 revolution, a program called "Guerrilleros de Enseñanza" or Teaching Guerillas was introduced, which continues in various forms in schools across Cuba today. Grade 6 students who are thinking of becoming teachers spend one day a week working with lower primary classes, teaching various topics and working with the classroom teacher. This continues throughout their secondary schooling, resulting in a situation where many trainee teachers begin their degrees with years of teaching experience.

### **Professional Development of Teachers**

One particularly impressive feature of the Cuban education system is its attention and commitment to the professional development of teachers (Gasperini 2000). It is widely recognised and accepted within Cuba, that the sorts of programs put into place to firstly achieve near universal literacy and later to genuinely raise the educational level of an entire nation, have required the use of teachers with in many cases, less than adequate qualifications.

Prior to the revolution the Cuban education system reflected all the gross inequalities present under the Batista regime, with less than half of Cuban children in schools, more than 1 million illiterates and an average educational level of less than Grade 3 (Gasperini 2000). In recognition of the enormous task of turning this around, many emergency programs were put into action, and despite obvious inadequacies, results recognised internationally as outstanding, were achieved. In recognition of these inadequacies, there has been an impressive ongoing commitment to the professional development of teaching staff at their various levels throughout the entire process, as well as an emphasis on practical training for new teachers. The documents prepared as part of this teacher training

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meals in restaurants, as well as for example tickets to artistic and cultural events.

have always been widely available to the public in general, who as already noted, is encouraged to be actively involved in the education process.

Gasperini discusses at length the Cuban commitment to the professional development of teachers. She notes a teacher-training environment of life-long training, a strong linkage between theory and practice, a "community of learning teachers", a strong commitment to action research, an emphasis on links with the community and a rigorous system of evaluation and accountability (Gasperini 2000, pg. 11).

Despite such an integrated and widely implemented approach, there are still weaknesses as identified by Cuban educationalists. The teaching standards of Cubans continue to improve, with wide participation in discussions around teaching methodology, learning styles as well as improving and maintaining current knowledge of content in subject areas. However, many remain more or less detached from discussions on broader educational, philosophical, pedagogical questions. This is viewed as a serious problem, and is recognised to be related to teachers' heavy workload, and among other things, a large number of other social commitments outside of school. Furthermore, it remains the case that some teachers perceive such themes as more academic and less related to them and their work. As a result, attempts are being made to encourage a more active participation of teachers in such discussions and developments (Robledo 1999). This appears to mirror a more broad and ongoing effort in Cuban society to encourage and enable maximum opportunity of working people to contribute to all aspects of their working lives, as well as the day-to-day tasks (Lara 1999). Certainly it appears that despite such weaknesses, in the main Cuban teachers are impressively familiar with current educational debates and ideas, and usually participating in action research projects at the local level testing out new theories and practices.

### **New teachers**

The seriousness with which Cuba takes the capacity of young people to contribute meaningfully to society is evident in many social programs, especially teacher training programs. For example there is a new initiative that involves highly motivated Year 11 students participating in an accelerated 6-month teaching course with a further 2-month supervised practical component. After completing the course, the graduates work as

primary school teachers for one year whilst completing their final year of secondary school on Saturdays. They can then elect to continue studying teaching or another profession. Partly the motivation for such a program remains the ongoing shortage of teachers, although its specific aim is to reduce all primary school classes to a maximum of 15 students per teacher as soon as possible. If achieved these figures would be well below the norm in Latin America, and well below existing figures and projected targets for Australian schools.

Although this situation is considered temporary and far from ideal from the perspectives of teacher training, there is nevertheless a genuine commitment to offering these young people the best chance to become good teachers. The successful results to date suggest this confidence is founded, with primary school children relating very positively to their young and enthusiastic mentors. The amount of social respect these young people hold is another example of how Cuba respects and empowers its young people.

The current campaign is an extension of several programs that have existed since education took centre stage after the 1959 revolution. The literacy brigades immediately after the revolution involved 11 and 12 year olds taking a year off school to go into the mountains and other rural areas to teach the peasant farmers and their families to read and write. The *guerrilleros de enseñanza* program, as already mentioned, continues today. The willingness of young people to participate in these programs reflects their commitment to the ongoing social priority of education (Cruz 2001).

## **Parents**

There are aspects of Cuban life, which could be expected to create tension between young people and their families. E.g. the continued shortage of quality housing means that many generations often live together in the same house. However in discussions with the VSC students it became clear that relations between young people and their parents are in general very positive. While some knew of some young people who weren't close to their parents, they suggested that overwhelmingly parents and their children related to each other very well and explained why they thought this was the case.

(Relations between students and their parents are) *Good, very good, because Cuban parents are not so conservative. More or less they have been adapting to changing times, they know how to think like young people think, they can talk to young people, share with them ideas and discuss with young people their opinions.*

*It's not just about parents leading young people with their own ideas, there is a positive interaction between young people and their parents. It's not just a case of young people being told an opinion, there is an interchange of ideas, things are not simply directed, it's not just about being told.*

This appears to be a function of the relative lack of prejudices based on age in Cuban society, but also of the very esteemed place of education. People are not considered adults, in the sense of having equal rights to contribute to society, due to their place in the work/employment structure, but rather in relation to their educational interests. As explained in the literature review, young people are actively involved in their communities, and it is not uncommon to have children under the age of 12 participating in aspects of Cuban life, which would elsewhere be considered the business of adults.

### **Parents and Learning**

As Lutjens notes, there exists a strong commitment to ensuring opportunities for parents to be involved in their children's education and schools.

In administering education within a system that stresses community input through formal participation, the activity of those inside the schools is also organised; in addition to the union, management council, and political organisations, school councils provide a means for linking the home and the neighbouring community with the schools (Lutjens 2000, pg. 10).

Furthermore, it is likely that many of the students' parents are enrolled in some form of formal education themselves (2/3rds of Cuban adults are enrolled in some form of education or training) or if not, engaged in informal education through *La Universidad por Todos* or something similar. It is the intention of the government that all Cubans have the opportunity to engage in a more or less constant cycle of learning, either specific

employment related skills and knowledge, or purely recreational classes such as vegetarian cooking.

Some of the students cited being able to share their educational achievements with their parents as part of their learning experience.

*Having the confidence of your parents is important, because they can set a positive learning example...to be able to talk about school and learning and ideas with your parents is important for learning.*

*When I learn something new that I didn't used to understand, I feel a great happiness inside, since my mind has processed this new lesson for life. After I have acquired this new knowledge, I put it to the test and talk about it with my close family.*

In discussing parents, it is useful to discuss the relationship between socio-economic status and education, as it relates to parents' employment. Discussed in part earlier in the chapter, it is important to note that in the Cuban context, employment does not indicate a particular socio-economic status as it may do in Australia for example. In Australia, a parent's type of employment and therefore income has been shown to impact on a student's learning environment and opportunities (Victorian Council of Social Services 2004). A professional parent in Cuba, while possibly leading to 'higher' educational aspirations, does not suggest a particular socio-economic status. In fact, in Cuba today it is possible for a highly educated, professional to be among the lowest paid worker, particularly in the context of the tourism sector and its contradictions. Parental influences on student learning could include the type of home environment and the level of education of and support from Cuban parents, both generally but not always very high, but not questions of economics given the provision of a uniform, completely free education system.

### **On being a Cuban young person today**

The students were at ease and comfortable with each other in the group interviews. The second group interview took place in an informal lounge at VSC, used for special meetings, with the students sitting on the floor or on couches. Despite this group of adolescent students sitting close to each other, in an out-of-school routine situation, they were nothing

but relaxed and focused on the research. The manner in which they related to each other seemed based on mutual respect and healthy friendship.

When asked the question “*What is it like to be a Cuban young person today?*” the students’ responses were unanimously positive.

*Cubans are generally pretty amiable people, they get on with everyone, everyone is chevere* <sup>18</sup>.  
*They’re people who are good at sharing things and opinions, everyone knows this about Cubans. Anyone who comes here from overseas notices this straight away. Even if the Cuban person doesn’t know you they will help you out, anyway in which Cubans can help out they usually will, and with young people this is even more so.*

*Exactly, relations between Cuban youth are perfect, if someone falls down, someone else will always help them up. In the classroom too, if someone needs help, or doesn’t understand something, someone else will always help them, explain it to them, or help them talk it through with the teacher.*

This point is worth elaborating. The students spoke considerably about peer relations in the classroom, and of the supportive and collaborative approach they take to theirs and others’ learning. Despite the fact that e.g. Cuban University places are granted to those with the highest academic results, with other factors also considered, there seems to be a complete absence of competitiveness amongst Cuban school students.

*In the classroom itself, fellow students will help each other out, like if a student is having a problem with a teacher, they will talk to other students about it and try and help each other out, we’re always together, adults see us that way.*

Throughout their school lives, the ability and willingness to assist one’s peers in their studies is praised as the most highly valued attribute (Wald 1978). This reflects the general philosophical outlook of solidarity and a collective approach evident throughout the Cuban education system. Its roots can be found in the more specific experiences of the mass literacy campaign (Lutjens 2000, pg. 4), and is reflected in the Cuban model of teacher

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<sup>18</sup> Chevere is a term popular amongst youth at the moment which could be translated as “cool”, as it is used by young people in Australia.

training. Hurtado et al discuss this concept in relation to the historical experience of the mass literacy campaign.

The new pedagogical conception of the epoch, in which a special form of cooperation was shown, is expressed in just one phrase “those who know more, teach those who don’t know”. This principle of teaching alongside learning, constitutes the contribution of revolutionary Cuban pedagogy, that was found at the base of the literacy work, and later which fundamentally served to create the movement of monitors, principally in the middle level, where the most outstanding students become auxiliaries of the teachers, assisting other students with difficulties (Hurtado, Rodriguez et al. 1996, pg. 16).

After explaining that their only responsibility as young people is to study, and learn, the students elaborated on what life entails for Cuban youth.

*We talk about, do and like the same as all young people – music, love, sexuality, politics, fashion, parties, the movies, the world, our municipalities, to have fun, to learn. The main things we think about are a career and fun!*

*We do lots of things collectively and have many different social groups of friends and social circles. There are massive free concerts for e.g. Los Van Van. Tourism has brought money to the economy and also some famous visitors, we like the Backstreet Boys and other popular artists.*

*We go to the movies, to the beach, to Copellia’s<sup>19</sup>, the coast, the beach. We communicate with each other very freely and comfortably*

The cultural references are particularly interesting and a reflection of the accessibility of art and culture to all Cubans as discussed earlier. While this accessibility has led to a genuine interest amongst youth in such aspects of life, and resulted in a thriving youth music scene as well as youth involvement in all aspects of local culture, it is still considered to be insufficient. The ongoing campaign to qualitatively improve aspects of education in Cuba

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<sup>19</sup> Che Guevara insisted that one of the first tasks of the revolution be the creation of huge ice-creameries, serving almost free ice cream to Cubans, be set-up in every major city. Copellia’s is the name of these caf  s. One exists in the centre of the suburb of Vedado.

has as a key priority, fostering a greater appreciation amongst youth of art, history and culture (López 1999). In 2001, US super-group the Backstreet Boys were popular visitors to Cuba, with a massive almost-free show in Havana.

### **The question of youth disengagement from Cuban society**

While it is considered that the views and experiences of the VSC students are more or less representative of views held more widely, it is important to note that a contrary perspective exists. Such an alternative view is investigated here, not only to ensure a rounded exploration of the subject matter of Cuban student attitudes to learning, but also because the response of the Cuban government illuminates further, points made concerning educational reform and approaches to young people in general in Cuba.

According to the VSC students, youth disengagement is a minority experience, and is

*...not a big problem, but there are a small minority of kids who play up sometimes, usually it's the "usual suspects" and there are not many, and not in every class.*

*Delinquency is minimal, a minority of course, because Cuban young people have security and liberty. There is no danger in the streets as in other countries, there are no knives e.g. we can go anywhere without fear.*

While these comments reflected the attitudes and experiences of the VSC students, it is widely acknowledged in the Cuban literature that The Special Period generated new problems of social alienation and disengagement, primarily amongst youth slipping between the gap of schooling and employment, those experiencing a family breakdown, or those with an intellectual or physical disability (Robledo 1999, pg. 319-331). On delinquency, Lutjens asserts that

Generational differences are acknowledged in Cuba, and the official position on youth has never ignored what some discover as the signs of an "alienated" younger generation – delinquency, cheating in school, evasion of agricultural labour, and low regard for military service (Lutjens 2000, pg. 10).

Although the situation is appropriately of great concern to the Cuban government, it is worth noting the difference between figures surrounding youth in most developed countries and those in Cuba. The cultural atmosphere of Cuban society and the high level of general education tend to contain anti-social behaviours within limited parameters.

In addition, the broader social context of socialist Cuba generates further contradictions within such disengagement. For example it is interesting to note that in 1998, over 75% of youth working in the tourism sector, i.e. those who have rejected a more socially productive position, remained members of the UJC (Robledo 1999). The UJC far from being an organisation with a large number of inactive members involves only those youth most committed to the principles of the revolution, to defending its gains and to organising other young people to that end. At present, the UJC is at the forefront of attempts to further promote youth culture and to strengthen commitment to the social and collectivist ideals of the revolution amongst youth.

The role of the family alongside the formal education system in supporting and guiding the overall development of young people was discussed by the VSC students, and is emphasised in government policy on youth. Lutjens notes that

The official Cuban position on delinquency reflects assumptions about personality formation as both biological and socially conditioned, about the causal role of home and family life, and about the need for collective decision-making regarding youth with problems (Lutjens 2000, pg. 9).

In discussing the nature and experiences of the Cuban family, and its ability to address such a task, Vilma Espín, president of the Federation of Cuban Women since its founding in 1960, notes that

...there are people who want to measure today's youth by the standards of years gone by, forgetting that these are children of the revolution – the product of our reality – and that they are already setting out to do their part based on their own motivations. But those who speak of generational conflicts in our country do not know our people's way of thinking. That is not the mark of the Cuban family,

which in itself brought about these transformations. The Cuban family is one which is finding answers to its concerns (Espin 1991, pg. 42-43).

However, Espín also stresses that the main role of commissions such as the National Commission for Attention to and Prevention of Social Problems, of which she was previously chair is to

...successfully combine the work of all the institutions struggling against the causes and factors leading to delinquent and antisocial behaviour; and to carry out prevention of and attention to social problems in a concrete way at a local level through the structures of the grassroots organisations (Espin 1991, pg. 49).

### **Cuban social work**

This perspective is at the heart of the Cuban government's response to these issues, which has seen the implementation of a range of programs of prevention and support for those in need, involving all of the major mass organisations and cross sectoral governmental bodies. In 2000 a 6 -year University social work degree was established, as well as a Social Work School in Cojimar, aimed specifically at involving youth in accelerated social work training courses. Since then several Social Work Schools in other provinces have been opened, with tens of thousands of young graduates now "investigating multiple phenomena within the scenarios of barrios and family units on behalf of Cuban society and extending a bridge toward those who need the help that the state can provide for each case." (Valencia 2003) Graduates of the Social Work Schools are guaranteed employment, provided they live in the community in which they are working, and assisted to complete further studies in a field of their choice on a part-time basis. According to two international social work theorists, the course's

... innovative core curricula integrating social work practice skills with political sociology and political economy is a strong model for social work training in other developing countries to address social problems related to national economic difficulties (Strug and Teague 2002).

In addition, the UJC and the FEU (primarily, others have also participated in varying degrees) have initiated and facilitated numerous programs to reach out to disconnected youth, including educational forums, social and cultural events, the establishment of video, games and TV rooms, and a greater attention to expanding the involvement of youth in leadership roles in the community. Specifically, the UJC are aiming to

...(encourage) more young people to take part in the accountability sessions of the local assemblies, and in candidate elections for locality delegates...respond to the leadership of the youth organisations in measure with the expectations of their memberships...increase the role of youth representation in all societal instances... (and) to assure the participation of young people in the decision-making around problems that are their responsibility in the matter of social policy of youth (Robledo 1999, pg. 147).

Considering that Cuban youth are guaranteed a job and basic living standards, dis-functionality among youth has a uniquely Cuban element and unique, general content. Young people disengaged from community life are still likely to be well educated and well fed, unlike any of their counterparts in the developing or even developed world. This is why much of social work done in Cuba is led by fellow youth with a political and socio-cultural commitment to Cuban society – it is effectively an ideological discourse that young people are contesting among themselves, a choice between the promises of Hollywood and Cuban history, culture and community. It is the broader context of such a situation which is of key concern in the following comparative chapter.

## Chapter 6.

*The school itself is a centre for forming people in life terms. The Cuban school is precisely a centre for training us as good future citizens, preparing us to help our country, our people, in social terms, and this is not simply because of the work of the teachers and staff and the classes at school, but also importantly because of the very fact that we share an experience at school, us ourselves, when we go to school and share our lives it prepares us for confronting future needs...it prepares you for your life. Also your interaction with teachers and other students, interaction with peers, and the community, all provide valuable life experiences.*

*Carlos, 9th Grade, VSC*

This comparative investigation of student attitudes to learning in Cuba and Australia, identified shared and context specific experiences and attitudes and revealed the impact of and imperatives of the respective educational and social conditions. It is considered that the data generated by and with the students of Melbourne West College (MWC) and Vedado Secondary College (VSC) offer invaluable and essential insights into student perspectives on learning, schooling and their relationship to each other. Furthermore, this research provides evidence indicating the need for structural, rather than cosmetic, educational reform if we are serious about engaging and actively involving our students in a meaningful educational experience. This study also suggests that such reform cannot simply be the product of “internal” changes from within the educational environment, but must also include the input and most importantly the needs of the wider community. Needs not defined by government and bureaucracy but defined locally and on a grassroots basis.

While the literature review identified significant differences in the character and dynamic of schooling in Cuba and Australia, the research revealed that the students in each country shared many opinions about what makes a positive learning environment. Whereas the MWC students generally expressed these as complaints or in the form of a wish list, the comments made by the VSC students were almost universally positive though also critical reflections and affirmations of experiences.

**Figure 13. Attributes of schooling which foster positive or negative attitudes to learning amongst students – Australia and Cuba**

Student Attitudes to Learning are positive when;	Student Attitudes to Learning are negative when;
<p><b>Australia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships between students and teachers are strong and based on mutual respect and trust.</li> <li>• Students are involved in aspects of schooling over which they feel they have some control – i.e. extra-curricular activities, electives and time spent with peers.</li> <li>• The content of education is considered relevant to them as individuals and in society.</li> <li>• The school environment is a relaxed, open and supportive one, which respects students' rights and opinions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Australia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a lack of respect and trust from teachers, and a perception that teachers are uninterested in the students' education.</li> <li>• Teachers use uninteresting, non-practical and non-participatory methods.</li> <li>• Students feel they have no voice and are passive actors in the schooling process.</li> <li>• Students feel they are not supported in their learning.</li> <li>• The curriculum is considered irrelevant.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cuba</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships between students and teachers are strong and based on mutual respect and trust.</li> <li>• Students feel a sense of ownership over school and processes of school change through active participation.</li> <li>• The value of learning as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility is promoted broadly in the community.</li> <li>• There is compatibility between students' schooling and their individual lives as active members of their families and communities, fostering social engagement.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Cuba</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers use uninteresting, non-practical and non-participatory methods.</li> <li>• When other students are not succeeding or are unmotivated.</li> <li>• When there is a lack of resources leading to a less dynamic and interactive learning experience.</li> </ul>

Figure 13 presents a summary of the attributes of schooling which foster positive attitudes to learning, and those of a learning environment which foster negative attitudes to learning, in both Australia and Cuba, as revealed through the data.

These contrasts in experience as well as the shared attitudes towards areas identified in the literature review as of central significance in educational debate today, are the key to understanding the principal points, and specific recommendations for action to be drawn out in this comparative chapter. Firstly, a comparative analysis of the two sets of data is presented, drawing on the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 as well as a developing understanding of broader context in each setting. Finally, an alternative model for education here in Victoria is offered based on education as community.

### **How can we best engage our young people?**

While the data generated in each context produced some startlingly different experiences, it also revealed clear, strong agreement from all participants on what makes a learning experience positive. As stated previously, while the Australian students posed most of their comments as negatives, implicit in those comments were answers to what makes learning a positive experience.

Two interconnected issues stand out. Firstly, important questions about what motivates students are raised. The Cuba based research demonstrated a very strong collectivist motivation among students. Students seemed most motivated when engaged actively in the building of their communities. When students can find their place in the world among others and working with others they seem most likely to have a positive attitude. A key success of the Cuban education system is its ability to construct education as community.

Secondly, and only in the context of education as community, can student input be genuinely reconsidered. Research in the Australian context suggests that the means to surpass consultation must be developed and students given a real stake in the education system's decision-making processes. The investigation carried out in Cuba suggests that when this occurs, a further issue of fundamental concern is necessarily raised. Student input brings into question the historically established philosophical foundations of the education system. That is, once students get a say they may not agree to prioritise the

educational goals established by the market economy. What are the possibilities for achieving genuine reforms which question the very basis upon which the Australian education system was established?

### **Education and community in Australia**

The Australian cases reflected their own socio-political contextualisation and arguably demonstrated just how determining this context is, in influencing student attitudes to learning. The cases reflected family lives and communities more or less discontinuous from the schooling environment, as well as social demands, in the main, inconsistent with individual student interests and aspirations.

These findings were in general, consistent with the theoretical observations made in Chapter two. The Australian education system generates a learning environment based on market exigencies often contradictory with community, family and individual interests. The incentives for learning are not organic to individual, family and community, but rather foreign. The sort of foreign incentives introduced involve the economic commodification of learning – encouraging students to learn in order to better position themselves in the labour and consumer markets.

The principles of education as community, based on democratic structures and participation, more or less as they are being presented here, can be found in a range of initiatives and reports within and about the Australian education system. For example some aspects of the Full Service Schools program and the vast literature on the work on the Middle Years of Schooling including (Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development Project 2004; Henry, Barty et al. 2003), the Student Action Teams projects (Australian Youth Research Centre. Department of Education and Training 2003), much of the philosophy behind Education Queensland's New Basics project and much of the work of Holdsworth on student participation, see for e.g. (Holdsworth 2004; Holdsworth 2000; Holdsworth 2001) and (Wierenga 2003). Moreover, such new ideas and agendas draw greatly upon and in many cases remain very similar to a wide range of progressive ideas and theories presented over the past 100 years and beyond. In an attempt to understand this apparent lack of real innovation in educational reform, Chapter 2 argued that such perspectives and initiatives could only be at best, successful rarities, at worst mere ideas, in

a system that effectively blocks genuine reform. The research into the Cuban education system reveals that its integrated approach, based on active participation is at the root of its success in engaging the vast majority of students in learning and in connecting the formal education sector with community life. The key principles of the Cuban education system stand in stark contrast with the market driven philosophy of the Australian education system, and offer an example of what could be possible here, if such a fundamental reappraisal were to take place.

### **An integrated approach is essential**

The most noticeable element of education in Cuba is its deliberate and planned integration with the general political economy, not as a means to an end but rather as an end in itself. This is the single most outstanding contrast with other systems, and the most likely element of difference impacting on educational outcomes: the political economy is determined by social goals, including education policy, rather than education being constructed by the exigencies of the political economy (Hurtado, Rodriguez et al. 1996, pg. 14-25).

In Cuba, community development is understood not in the Band-Aid sense as it is in the western market economy, but as the actual basis of the economy. Whereas the market economy is alienated from society, necessitating a community development preoccupied with alleviating problems, the Cuban economy as a socially planned economy generated by democratic decision-making and the prioritisation of the economic needs of society, is *in itself* community development.

Cuba's planned economy generates the possibility of social goal setting over and above the non-collectivist forces of the market. In this context society tends to spontaneously raise education to the forefront of social goals. This does not make education an independent phenomenon. Instead it reveals a continuous and consistent relationship between learning as an emancipatory human activity and education policy in an economic setting. Cuban education policy recognises the limits imposed on education by the economic level of the nation but as it prizes education as an end in itself it is able to turn education policy into a means by which to develop the economy rather than being a drain on the economy. As noted in Chapter 2, even in the worst moments of The Special Period, Cuba unlike Victoria, Australia in its comparably insignificant recession did not close one school and in

fact sustained and then increased educational spending (López 1999). In discussing education in Cuba within the context of socialist goals, Guevara is explicit.

Communism is an aim of humanity that is reached consciously; subsequently, education, the liquidation of the tasks of the old society in the conscience of people, is a factor of utmost importance, without forgetting obviously, that without parallel advances in production you cannot reach such a society (Guevara 1991, pg. 299).

Many programs implemented in Australian education as a result of research recommendations are discontinued due to lack of funding, however as James et al argue, “(i)t is a false economy to deny funding for programs that have such positive social and likely long-term economic outcomes.” (James, Leger et al. 2001, pg. 18) While convincing, this argument has little resonance in a climate of decreased educational funding more generally. This negative situation has even been recognised by philanthropists from the point of view of getting their money’s worth, with the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission investigating further through a report titled *Beyond the Pilot*.<sup>20</sup>

The Cuban cases suggested student attitudes to learning were set in a framework of high student expectations and a level of student politicisation that demanded certain rights. Students expected and assumed an open, relevant and socially integrated learning environment. Students expected school, i.e. formal learning, to be consistent with other learning environments, their home and community and to work to complement each other. All learning was expected to improve and add to other life interests, and to be consistent with them. At the heart of this was the natural connection and consistency between learning, leisure and work expressed by the VSC students. In stark contrast with the widely expressed attitude “I will study hard to get a better job”, the attitude expressed by the VSC students was more like “I learn about what I like and hope I can work in that same area”.

In a society which emphasises work so heavily when establishing one’s social identity, the question of gaining employment, let alone meaningful employment in the context of

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<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.vsic.org.au/Projects/Current/beyond>

significant youth unemployment (hovering around 20% for the first six months of 2005, Australian Parliamentary Library 2005) is a stressful one for young people in Australia.

These are some of the key points summarised in the 2004 release of the How Young People are Faring report on youth and the labour market by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

- 15.5% (or 214,800) teenagers and a further 309,000 young adults (22%) were without full-time work or full-time education in May this year.
- More than a quarter of all young people experienced a troubled transition after leaving school. In May 78,500 school leavers were not studying and were either unemployed, working part-time or not in the labour force.
- female school leavers not going onto further study are more likely to have a troubled transition than boys.
- Young people are now more likely to be in part-time work than ever before. Since 1995 full-time jobs for teenagers have declined by 5000, and fallen for young adults by 110,000 but grown for people over 25 years by more than 780,000 (Long 2004).

A press release on the report notes that it "reveals disturbing numbers of young people are being left behind, facing insecure employment, and reduced earnings over the long-term, as well as increased likelihood of poorer health and social disadvantage." (Stevens 2004, pg. 1) By contrast, unemployment is all but non-existent in Cuba today (Mas 2004). There are however other issues facing young people with regards work choices. While young people can easily study and usually work in whatever area interests them, employment for financial reward is another matter. Cuba's poverty and the effects of the US economic blockade create a situation where highly educated people end up working as prostitutes, or taxi drivers, or in other jobs which enable them to access US dollars. A range of social and economic programs and regulations have been implemented over recent years to address this issue, focusing on re-emphasising the social benefits of work such as teaching and medicine over jobs for personal gain, as well as tightly controlling private enterprise. Such measures have met with some success, although the Cuban government continues to prioritise working to address social inequality which has arisen out of the economic period (Robledo 1999).

At this point it is important to place the question of Cuba's poverty into context. Internationally respected economics indices consistently recognise that Cuba enjoys better living standards than the majority of the third world, and moreover than the majority of Latin America, itself a relatively affluent region in the third world, see for example (The United Nations Development Programme 2004). Moreover, Anderson notes that measures of poverty based solely on income are inadequate when discussing Cuba, given factors such as

...near universal home ownership (without mortgage payments and mostly without rent), free healthcare and education, community organised childcare, subsidised basic foods, guaranteed pensions and special needs assistance make income a very inadequate measure of poverty.... Nevertheless, Cuba fares reasonably well in the UNDP poverty index of 2000 (using mainly 1998 figures) due to good performance in many of the other factors that comprise this index: high life expectancy, very low illiteracy rate, good access to fresh water and health services (less so to sanitation) and low levels of underweight children (Anderson 2002, pg. 78-79).

### **Cuba – education as community**

Perhaps the most overwhelming contrast revealed through this study, and the most difficult to quantify, was the confidence of the Cuban students as citizens and future leaders of society, as compared to the Australian students. The Cuban education system is based on full exposure – students are encouraged to learn about every angle in history, society and science, rather than being given partial or sanitised versions of reality. Curriculum treats knowledge holistically and dynamically.

As a result Cuban students are confronted with decisions rather than *faits accomplis*, from very early on. In this sense, the Cuban education system is highly politicised. Students are treated as active socio-political agents from an early age, reflecting an educational philosophy influenced by such ideas as those of Paulo Freire. Students seem to treat society as a whole as their school, while at the same time relating to their school as they would to society in general, with both expectations and responsibilities.

To the Cuban students education as community is not simply an option, rather they are inextricably and fundamentally linked. The complementary experiences of family, school and community, or in other words the positive connectedness between the various layers of social existence, create a learning environment that fosters individual personal development with an emphasis on its social value (Cerdeira, Assaél, Ceballos and Sepúlveda 2000). Such a context inevitably fosters a positive attitude towards, and genuine and dynamic interest in, learning amongst students - revealed in this study through the students' willingness and ability to not only comment on their individual and specific attitudes to learning, but also to reflect on the definition, role and general question of education in society more broadly.

The example of Cuba brings to mind Dewey's arguments for a continuum of experience. Perkinson notes that

(t)he key to creating an educative environment, Dewey tells us in *Experiencing Education*, is the principal of the continuum of experience. That is, teachers should provide students with in-school experiences which have continuity with their experiences outside school as well as continuity with their past experiences and their future experiences" (Perkinson 1980, pg. 195).

### **Education and Community in Australia**

In contrast, most of the MWC students' opinions on learning and schooling were limited to largely personalised expressions of individual dis-empowerment rather than criticism or opinion with a broader purpose or vision. In other words the attitudes they expressed were in the form of microcosmic criticisms, rather than macro-criticisms. These students learn in a context where the different social layers of their lives are by no means complementary; rather they clash to create a confusing and alienating experience. Holdsworth captures their sentiments effectively when he discusses what he sees as "action poverty" arising from the defining notion of youth as student

It is a relatively passive role, always in preparation for action, but never acting . . . The consequences of the expansion of the student role, and the action poverty it implies for the young, has been an increased restiveness among the young. They are

shielded from responsibility, and they become irresponsible; they are held in a dependent status, and they come to act as dependents; they are kept away from productive work, and they become unproductive (Holdsworth 1996, pg. 27).

It is in the difference between the contradictions facing the MWC students, and the picture of engagement and connectedness presented by the VSC students, that the correctness of this study in emphasising the broader context of education within society as critical to understanding student attitudes, is vindicated.

The Australian education system shares important similarities with the Cuban system, both in terms of general principles of organisation and pedagogic foundations. It is suggested that fundamentally, it is the differences in socio-political context that account for the contrast in student attitudes to learning. The MWC data invariably showcased students as separated from citizenry – largely uninformed, overpowered and expected, indeed forced to submit to others and their goals, as opposed to goals of their choosing.

The research component in Australia demonstrated a fundamentally more alienated subject than in Cuba. Australian students are not used to being asked their opinions. Expressed well by Doherty, she notes that Australian students are

...sophisticated communicators who vote for *Big Brother* evictions and *Australian Idol* winners, conduct snappy conversations in SMS and hold forth in internet chat rooms. But when it comes to their schools and their education, these children are like lab rats subject to a litany of tests (Doherty 2005a).

Although the MWC students had no fewer things to say they were characteristically stressed and unconfident in forming and expressing their opinions. Based on their experiences, the students assumed that their opinions hold little value and that therefore no one really listens. Moreover, they assumed that offering their opinions could see them judged negatively. Often such weaknesses were reflected in the MWC students' inability to express their opinions in a generalised way.

Nevertheless, the data generated by the MWC students were insightful, relevant to contemporary issues in theories of learning and schooling, and often posed in a

constructive framework. In and of themselves the data support the assertion that greater input from students would enrich the development of educational theory/ies. Moreover this research highlights the potential of an education system which seeks to foster the critical minds of students rather than suppress them, ignore them, or at best give them token recognition.

### **Educational Change: policy and planning**

Reviewing the Cuban and Australian literature on education and pedagogy there are often similarities between Cuban documents and more progressive ideas amongst Australian educational theorists. For example an emphasis on fostering creativity, critical thinking and research skills and on co-operative learning can be found in both, and the students' comments on positive learning experiences from both VSC and MWC overwhelmingly endorsed the claims of such theories. Many of the reforms suggested in the report *Making Connections* (James, Leger et al. 2001, pg. 12 & 16), for example those discussing communities of practice and productive teacher participation (pg. 42-43) are standard practice in Cuba. The shift of emphasis from breadth of content to depth of learning found in the new Victorian curriculum *Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)*<sup>21</sup> mirrors current reforms being made to the equivalent of our 'middle years' in Cuba which seek to build on and improve previous reforms in this area (Robledo 1999). VELs also seeks to prepare students with an improved understanding of the complexities of the rapidly changing world we live in and an ability to problem solve, both fundamental aims of the Cuban system.

The social and political context of education in Cuba enables these priorities and values to become reality and in the case of reforms, offers the opportunity to fully test out such new ideas thoroughly, and in a supportive environment. Conversely, as the literature review explained, the economic and political context of education in Australia at present is hostile to reform, of any nature but in particularly genuine progressive, that is to say democratic, reform in public education. A contemporary example that perhaps illuminates such hostility is the response of the Australian Education Union (AEU) Victoria branch to the VELs implementation process proposed by the government.

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>

While the union supports the content of VELS it issued a press release noting that insufficient resources and support for teachers threaten the new curriculum's effective implementation.

Teachers are not only expected to teach students and prepare curriculum, but are also required to attend to a whole range of administrative tasks. Our teachers are lacking the real resources and time to be able to juggle the state government's requirements (Bluett 2005).

While this response from the AEU highlights the need for improvements in teaching conditions and support, it also reveals the very practical barriers facing educational reform under current practice in Australia today.

### **What drives the reform agenda in Australia?**

Holdsworth, in discussing the philosophical perspectives and motivation behind some educational reform, suggests that approaches to "alternatives" in education fall into two broad categories'.

1. (w)e have basically got the provision of education right and therefore there is something wrong with young people who resist or don't fit in or they may be behaving inappropriately. These young people must change and we develop schooling measures to enable this to happen; or
2. (w)e are recognizing symptoms of un-met needs within our society and schools. The education provided is inappropriate to the needs of at least some young people and it is the education system's responsibility to change (Holdsworth 2004, pg. 4).

Beyond the primary point that this undermines attempts to genuinely address inequality and disengagement amongst our young people in schools across the board, as a structural consideration, relegating "alternatives" to such a purpose generates social stigmatism.

There is rich diversity amongst these alternatives and they are responding both to social need and also to strong interest. As has been pointed out, while 'choice' is a

strong positive term and while there is much student and parental interest in doing something different, there is also fear of alternatives that might lock students out of access to success, that characterise students as ‘failures’ and that concentrate behavioural and learning difficulties. And that’s how **all** alternatives are being portrayed. The more they are seen as behavioural or therapeutic responses, the further they move from being broadly accepted as valid for all (Holdsworth 2004, pg. 5).

Of course there are many examples of research which have concluded that Australia’s school system warrants a system-wide re-appraisal, and that the principles of equity and social justice are not being realised. However, given the disparity that exists between academic research and public policy, too often such educational research is marginalised and public policy is usurped by the exigencies of governments and public bureaucracy. Public policy selectively makes use of research rather than research impacting on the actual content of public policy. In other words, relevance is achieved when pro-government academics are employed to ensure that particular policy recommendations are made. This process is dictated by the mechanisms of the market economy. Simon Marginson reflects on this in relation to Higher Education reforms in (Marginson 2000).

Consequently policy is unlikely to be informed by practice - that is the daily experiences of students and teachers as they occur and as understood by them. Problems tend to escalate until they can no longer be ignored (i.e. falling retention rates, literacy levels) before policy changes are developed in a correctional rather than proactive manner. A genuine commitment to improving our education system for all students, driven within a framework of community participation and increased democracy, would ensure that the needs of the current generation were being met, rather than introducing policies which may or may not be relevant to the future generations they end up affecting. In arguing for a more democratic and participatory learning experience, it is argued that policy must be practice-influenced and proactive rather than corrective or reactive.

Such a commitment is not simply a question of a speedy response to issues as they arise. Watson, in his argument for the need to reconceptualise comparative education research in the face of new challenges of globalisation, notes the speed with which many educational reforms do take place today. He notes that “...governments might only have a limited life

span before new elections...(and) are committed to educational reforms but over a short time span..." (Watson 2001, pg. 211), and suggests that this can lead to "...'quick fix' ideas or principles... 'borrowed' from one society and transferred to another without thinking through the consequences." (Pg. 12)

This assertion is interesting in the context of educational change in Cuba, whose system could be considered amongst the least stable internationally. As MacDonald notes, between 1959 and 1985 it had "...undergone at least eight major changes involving considerable administrative upheaval and some difficulty for individuals, and ...is constantly the subject of minor changes (and suggestions for change) in curriculum, broader relations with the workforce, etc." (MacDonald 1985, pg. 31) This trend appears to have continued to the present day. Such characteristics of change would perhaps be expected in Watson's context of short political cycles and rushed policymaking, however Cuba's governmental structures remain unchanged since 1959.

Two points require emphasis here. Of primary significance is the overall social and political context of education in Cuba, which provides the cohesive philosophical framework for policy and planning decisions, and which inherently promotes a positive attitude to change and improvement. McInerney notes in his discussion on renegotiating Australian schooling for social justice that "clearly there are limits to what individual school communities can achieve when it comes to transforming the structural forces which sustain oppressive practices in the first place." (McInerney 2003, pg. 258) In Cuba, as elaborated in Chapter 5, the centrality of concepts such as action research, professional development and constant self-assessment and reflection inevitably lead to a healthy cycle of reform. While a developing idea here in Australia, in Cuba there is widespread understanding that it is impossible to separate learning and teaching (the practice of pedagogy) from research.

The second point relates to the relationship between changes in policy and changes in practice. In the environment of change to which Watson refers, shifts in policy may or may not be accompanied by transformations of practice in classrooms. Given the lack of involvement of teachers and students in educational research and planning in Australia, outlined in the literature review, it is understandable that there is often a delay between policy changes being announced and when they are implemented. Moreover, implementation is often uneven, further reflecting the distance between those coming up

with the ideas and those actually responsible for putting them into practice. The alienation of the majority of teachers and students from decision-making in education makes the type of quick-fix reforms preferred by governments under pressure to perform quickly, near impossible to implement with success.

Research priorities in Cuba are not set by short-term party-political interests but rather by educational practice and field work itself – which are of course dynamic and not stable in that sense. Students, teachers and academics generate research directly, through various non-government organisations, and just as much indirectly, through a critical practice (Rodríguez, Batista, León and Inza 2001). The Cuban system generates an integrated approach to research and policy, within which contradictions are dynamically resolved at all levels through democratic classrooms, schools and the education system as a whole. The involvement of all parties at all levels ensures that such resolutions are more likely to be rapid, effective and consistent in their implementation, e.g.(MacDonald 1985).

It is the organic link between political and educational structures and organisations which enables such effective implementation of policy and policy changes in Cuba. Despite knowledge of the benefits of such an integrated approach, and commitment to various democratic reforms, the almost complete absence of such a link between institutions in Australia, make such reforms all but impossible.

One small example is a statement made in the Victorian Labor Government's *Blueprint for Government Schools* (Kosky 2003) by Minister for Education and Training Lynne Kosky.

Parent, teacher and student opinion data will be provided to all schools on a consistent basis to provide insight into school performance and information to support improvement (Kosky 2003, pg. 6).

Given the minimal existing structures to support such a practice, it is difficult to imagine how such a massive task would be effected. Details of implementation are not elaborated on and unfortunately the well-informed intention appears to have remained rhetoric. Coming out of the Blueprint, Kosky commissioned a document from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority charged with developing the new curriculum standards which are now known as VELS. While the consultation process undertaken as

part of the development of VELS involved teachers and parents, students were not approached (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004b).

### **Community Citizenship and Students**

It has been well documented recently that youth in Australia have a widespread lack of knowledge about political processes and structures, disinterest in and furthermore cynicism towards all things seemingly officially political (Ewins 2004; Manning and Ryan 2004; Down 2004). A vicious cycle is set in train which in turn fosters negative stereotypical images of disinterested and anti-social youth in the community. The current experience of young people in schools is very much at the heart of this antagonism, providing an opportunity for educational policy and practice reform to situate itself in the thick of a broader struggle to change it.

However Bessant argues that much of the current policy with its emphasis on increasing youth participation lacks an understanding of the realities of young people's lives and therefore runs the risk of being more regulatory than empowering.

An analysis of the official youth participation agenda reveals there is considerable talk about democratic practice, but a failure to acknowledge the existing barriers to young people. It also reveals a will to extend governance of young people under the guise of participation, as well as a failure to establish participatory mechanisms that give material effect to young people's voices. In spite of official talk about the value of youth participation and its relationship to citizenship, the actual effect of having more people involved in various community and educational activities cannot increase their political efficacy but instead will serve only to increase the regulation of young people.

We need to acknowledge that we have a significant problem when so many young people are effectively denied citizenship status. There is no reasonable basis excluding young people from what is an otherwise widely available set of political and civil rights. Young people generally, and especially those under 18 years of age, have no effective entitlement to engage politically, to have a say about matters that affect them or to take part in decision making. Tackling this issue involves

deepening and extending the current rhetoric about youth participation (Bessant 2004, pg. 402).

The Taking Young People Seriously guides (Office for Youth 2004; Office for Youth 2004b; Office for Youth 2004c) reflect the assertions Bessant is making. While the motivation for the project is fantastic and stems from a genuine interest in improving youth participation, the overall emphasis is on forms of consultation. The documents make some good arguments for moving beyond mere consultation and the need for young people to also take on active decision-making roles. However, they are restricted to improving young people's lot in existing structures and committees, recognising limitations from the outset, and fail to adequately address the structural constraints on youth participation. The notions of democracy and opportunity which frame the parameters of these reports are the very same which ring hollow to young people, as evidenced by a range of recent studies. In a recent survey conducted by the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (Manning and Ryan 2004) just over 60% of 15-17 year olds agreed that Australia is a democratic country, with 15.7% strongly agreeing and 45.1 % agreeing. The remaining 39.2% were either ambivalent or felt that Australia is undemocratic. Moreover, only 26% of 15-17 year olds agreed that Australian society was fair (within that only 3.1% strongly agreeing), and only 30.6% agreed that everyone has fair and equal access to the legal system. In the report's conclusion Manning and Ryan note that

There seems to be a high level of support for engagement and participation, but a very low level of perceived social and political power. There is clear support for the idea that young people want to be involved in decision-making, and want to be taken seriously as active citizens. However, there is an equally clear perception that they are not influential citizens, and that decision-makers generally do not respond to their views (Manning and Ryan 2004, pg. 61).

In the first instance, a shift in thinking is required to ensure that input from students is considered as *essential* and of primary importance in educational decision-making. Student perspectives must be prevalent in all facets of research and policy planning as developed through their actual involvement. Through the process of engaging with their communities, through collaboration and sharing knowledge, and by actively working together to seek change, an understanding of the social value of education will be fostered amongst

students. Conversely, such an approach sees schools become places of learning for the whole community.

The involvement of youth in community decision-making needs to be an expected and standard feature rather than something novel and at best irregular. Young people should be particularly but not exclusively involved with issues concerning youth. Youth representative structures must exist, to facilitate democratic and participatory discussion amongst youth, and enable youth to impact directly on decisions which affect them personally and as members of the community.

Youth participation should not be “...used as a mechanism for social control (keeping young people gainfully occupied and out of trouble)” but rather must be about “...recognising young people as co-creators of their communities.” (Wierenga 2003, pg. 68) It is here that the challenge noted at the beginning of this chapter, that genuine youth participation and voice may lead to opinions and value which challenge existing practice, is highlighted. Wierenga states that

There is a lot happening on the youth activist front. Young people’s concerns and group actions often involve critiquing political decisions (eg. refugees, racism, uranium mining). These ‘projects’ are not neatly linked into the way communities tell stories about themselves (i.e. through mass media) and are often misunderstood. Because these are not politically sanctioned or controlled examples of young people in decision-making, the young people involved are likely to be portrayed as professional protestors, hooligans, uninformed, or dangerous. As such these groups often bypass community legitimacy or community support (Wierenga 2003, pg. 68).

Only a youth participation and citizenship model based on engaging young people in a collective movement alongside and with fellow community members, which has at its roots, the struggle for social change, can achieve the well-intentioned aims and objectives of much of the research in this area.

## **Students and Citizenship**

The Cuban education system both reflects and influences the high levels of citizenship participation in Cuban social and political affairs. Like Cuban society as a whole, the education system is organised on the basis of involvement. The central place and role of nationwide social organisations; neighbourhood communities and councils; school and classroom structures of decision-making; and staff structures, is to empower student, family, and community in the education system (Robledo 1999). This is in stark contrast with the Australian education system, where involvement is restricted to processes of government and bureaucratic consultation, if indeed that.

While the VSC data indicate that young people in Cuba feel supported and respected through these structures, and appreciate their unique position in society, the MWC students paint a picture of dis-engagement and alienation. The Cuban students spoke of positive relationships that bridged their school life, their home life and their communities. Sports clubs were the only types of community involvement mentioned by some of the MWC students, experiences which seem largely although not entirely disconnected from school life.

The Cuban system encourages involvement of students, family, staff and community in actual policy formation and execution, and appears to be very successful in its efforts. The positive experiences of participating actively in a range of collective situations in life, give the Cuban students the confidence, skills and interest to participate actively in all facets of their educational experience. It is likely that students, especially those aged 14 and above have at some stage worked collaboratively with their teachers outside of school, in the CDR's and other organisations such as sporting clubs etc.

One illuminating example of the differences between the Australian and Cuban approaches is the question of extra-curricular activities. Fullarton measures student engagement as reflected through involvement in extra-curricular activities (Fullarton 2002). Certainly this study reinforces the idea that involvement in such programs (music, sport, theatre etc) often constitutes students' best and most positive school experiences in the Australian context. However such programs are offered sporadically, are often dependent on the commitment of individual schools or staff, and are constantly under threat due to lack of

funds and a low status in the school timetable. As a result, opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities are often dependent on socio-economic factors. In contrast, the term extra-curricular is inappropriate in Cuba, as such activities/programs are all fundamental to the overall school/community experience, and as such are not only available to all, but are in fact an integral part of the educational process. Rather than being a valued experience if and when they happen, as is the case in Australia, they are one indispensable aspect of a holistic approach to the educational development of Cuban youth.

The congruity between expectations, experiences and the realities of school life ensure an engaged student population in Cuba. Young people are taken seriously and as a result, are confident and motivated to take up the challenge of leading their communities, now and in the future. Conversely, for young people in Australia, the contradictions of life tend to foster mistrust, anxiety and a lack of confidence, leading to an alienated student population, often unable to identify their role in society.

### **Civics Education Cuban style**

In response to among other things the general lack of interest amongst youth in the political system and of their mistrust and dislike of politicians of all persuasions, the question of how education systems can prepare students for life as active citizens in a democracy is currently being asked in education theory, throughout the developed world. The widely differing views on the why's and how's of achieving such a task have been discussed previously in this thesis.

What distinguishes civics education from the system of democratic education which prevails in Cuba is that the former is aimed at adjusting young people to the political system or in other words encouraging them to see what is good about it. In Cuba the system of democratic schooling is a central part of a more participatory democracy. In the Cuban case educational democracy is not a process of social adjustment but a process of permanent social construction.

One example is the involvement of the Pioneros in federal, regional and local elections. For all elections and plebiscites in Cuba, it is not government officials or police who oversee

the collection and counting of the ballots at each voting station, rather it is the responsibility of the Pioneros. The serious approach young people take to such tasks, as well as the response of the population more generally was witnessed by the researcher during time spent in Cuba. The population was mobilised to march and then vote in a plebiscite for socialism, with the Pioneros organising and running (in collaboration with the FEEM) the main speaking platform at the march which involved approximately 1 million people and overseeing the voting process, which involved more than 7 million people (Rassi 2002). Serious Pionero volunteers, organised to be there by their fellow students staffed each voting station. Older Cubans voting often stopped to thank them for their efforts in what certainly appeared to be genuine displays of respect.

Rather than being a simple stunt, the experiences of the students in such activities are an extension of their participation in school democracy and in the Pioneros movement. Not only do they understand the political process, they are as active within it as non-voting youths can be. Moreover, if it were only a matter of tokenism, it is worth asking why hasn't a similar system been implemented in Australia or indeed anywhere outside of Cuba? Similarly, it is worth noting that Cuba is one of only 3 countries internationally which allow voting in elections from the age of 16 (Bellringer 2003). By the age of 16, Cuban young people have considerable experience in the political processes of the country and are able and keen to cast an informed vote (Robledo 1999).

Another example of civics education in Cuba is the voluntary work which is carried out by the majority of Cuban school students. Alongside a strong curricular emphasis on social responsibility, Cuban students actively take on a range of social tasks inside and outside the classroom. The VSC students spoke of municipal inspections as part of the campaign to rid Havana of the Dengue carrying mosquito, preventative preparations for the cyclone season in July and the regular tasks of repairing books and cleaning the school and municipality, as some examples of activities in recent times.

In response to the question, *Does your school prepare you to be good citizens and if so how?* one VSC student noted that

*School influences kids a lot- we get our ideas and encouragement. Really from infant school onwards – we did music and songs, drawings, photos and other stuff that made us feel like people, that encouraged us to have opinions and say things. Now for example we have a program on TV every Thursday that goes through different careers that students can consider every week. We get a lot of opportunities to take a place in society.*

By making the educational experience interesting and useful, precisely by connecting them to the real world they live in, Cuban students are given a sense through everything they learn and do as part of school that they are not powerless. Quite the contrary, they feel empowered through their schooling experience, and as a result education is not meaningless. The Cuban example of education as community, with its democratic structures and opportunities for active participation, empowers students and improves student attitudes to learning.

### **Democratic Schooling**

Debates surrounding the idea of and potentiality for democratic schooling are at the forefront of contemporary educational philosophy and policy debates. This study suggests that the question of democracy is fundamental, and has proven useful in illuminating the possible interpretations of democratic schooling and their various forms and potentials. Moreover, this study suggests that involving students in educational research, and policy and curriculum decision making, in other words as active participants in the broader aspects of their learning experience, should be seen as critical to the growing call for a more democratic approach to schooling, not only for its own sake but to assure relevance and social value.

Education or the process of learning and teaching can occur in any number of environments. That some environments may be more or less conducive to the development of independent and critical thought among students is undoubtedly true. However, this conclusion in itself does not exhaust the choices that educationalists must and do make deliberately or otherwise. Historically speaking, there is a more fundamental choice that educationalists are forced into making. In most societies education can be said to have either tended toward an *integrationist* purpose; education and training for the purpose of greasing the wheels of the existing social structure, or a *transformative* purpose;

with a purpose of social reform and transformation (Ponce 1993). On the one hand there are the liberal views aimed at improving the *integration* of the student into society. On the other hand are the anti-systemic views which promote democracy as empowerment of the student (Freire 1970). As elaborated in Chapter 2, theoretical perspectives on democracy in education tend to reflect these two major historico-philosophical trends.

The Cuban education system reflects the influence of the anti-systemic trend. Education in Cuba is considered part of an anti-systemic process, characterised by both domestic and international conflict. In this sense, education is imbued with a heavily active content. Unlike education in liberal inspired societies, Cuban education is not seen as a relatively passive filter for the reproduction of dominant ideas. On the contrary, education is valued precisely as a motor-force of new ideas and as a battleground for the contest between new and old ideas. In other words, education as permanent community development (Hamecker 2002).

In outlining his definition of *critical pedagogy*, McLaren argues that

A critical pedagogy for multicultural education should quicken the affective sensibilities of students as well as provide them with a language of social analysis, cultural critique, and social activism in the service of cutting the power and practice of capital at its joints... Opportunities must be made for students to work in ethnically diverse populations in the context of community activism and participation in progressive political alliances. Students need to move beyond simply knowing about criticalist, multiculturalist practice (McLaren 2000, pg. 103).

### **Freire's problem solving education**

A theme which emerged out of the Cuban revolution and which continues to have resonance in Cuba today is "our weapons are our ideas". This is well exemplified by the students at VSC. Cuban students are taught, from the *circulos infantiles*<sup>22</sup> right through to university level, that their most important social responsibility is to develop their own ideas

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<sup>22</sup> Childcare centres either based in communities or connected to workplaces.

and the ability to critically and constructively analyse the world around them. Freire's problem-posing and solving education theories are easily recognised amongst the VSC data.

Cuban school students demonstrate an ability to generalise and perhaps socialise their experiences and to place themselves in the big picture, at the same time realising with confidence and optimism the role they have to play as individuals in society. It was clear that the VSC students' understanding of a phrase they used throughout the study "learning is our only responsibility," was both personal and social, and reflective of how time at school is an empowering experience for them. Conversely, the MWC data suggest that the education system in Australia encourages an individualistic outlook, fuelled by stress and anxiety about the future.

The MWC data suggests that students concur with the growing body of research calling for democratic schooling. Their criticisms validate arguments which have been well documented previously, within the broad and growing literature criticising what Freire labels the banking model of education. As Chapter 2 explained, students are invariably ignored, and yet when asked, as in this study, their perspectives on problems, solutions, reforms and possibilities for change, add an incredibly useful critique that is not only *constructive* but also indicates concrete potential paths for reform.

The MWC students' comments reflected an almost universal lack of a sense of ownership in the educational process, which meant from the outset, learning and school experiences were led by and largely arranged for other people. Criticisms of the lack of choices, lack of voice, lack of personal respect and so on reflect a profoundly undemocratic school experience. Perhaps this is also evidenced by the fact that the students we consider our "best" are usually those who demonstrate an ability to adapt most effectively to the school environment, rather than those who seek to, and have the skills to actively and critically improve the school environment. Where the students see or experience an alternative to this alienating environment, however small, a genuine and positive learning experience is usually to be found.

## **Whose school?**

Whereas the MWC students felt that school was a place they had to be at, owned and controlled by others, the VSC students considered the school to be their school. The sense of ownership they feel they have over their learning process, extends to a sense of ownership over the buildings and grounds of the school in which they learn. As a result there is little to no vandalism in Cuban schools, and in fact students spend portions of their voluntary work time mending well-used books, maintaining school grounds and erasing text written in pencil from notebooks so that they may be used again. Resources are so scarce and almost all used collectively, that they are greatly appreciated by the students. A great sense of pride is taken by the students in the appearance of their school grounds and buildings. The following quote is taken from a book widely circulated in Cuba in 1976 and aimed at the general public, explaining the government's perspectives for education, and urging support for the massive redirection of public spending towards education and hence its reconstruction.

And we return to repeat that which we have said before: if you want a child to look after the garden, teach them to sow the garden, teach them to water the garden; make it so that the child produces the garden, and no one will have to be behind them with a stick so that they don't destroy the garden; teach the child to grow a tree, and no one will have to castigate them not to destroy trees. They destroy that which they have not created... (Castro 1976, pg. 124).

Yes, that which they have not created, but furthermore that which they have not the slightest possibility or opportunity to change or influence. Cuban students are given genuine opportunities to influence and shape their schooling experiences both in the classroom and in the physical layout and organisation of the school. In contrast, the MWC students felt they had no control over, and moreover no personal connection to their schools, and often felt that decisions made regarding school life were in opposition to their own.

## **Teachers**

In arguing for greater student control over schools, this research presents very strongly the need for the development of a new student-teacher relationship in our schools. Not from the perspective of a Band-Aid treatment of a damaged association, but rather by placing this relationship at the centre of the educational setting and working to imbue it with a new content, based on democracy, creativity and respect. Through this process teachers and students could work collectively to develop a vision, as well as a set of practices for a new collaborative and democratic teaching and learning environment.

Both the VSC and MWC students emphasised the role of teachers and their relationships with students as of central or even primary importance in determining students' attitudes to learning. When asked about positive learning environments the Cuban students stressed the reciprocal, collective and democratic nature of discussions in their classrooms. The central task of education in Cuba, stressed in all of the documents prepared by pedagogical scientists with and for teachers is to create thinking, critical, independent and confident young people, see for example; (Hurtado, Hernández et al. 2000; Martí and Rodríguez 1999a; Montero 1998b). The students refer to this as the "exchange of ideas" in the classroom, pointing out that teachers are not always correct but always keen to learn from students. While the Australian students' comments suggest that this occurs in some classrooms, such experiences are referred to as something other than 'the norm'.

The exchange of ideas in Cuban classrooms results in an incredibly positive and strong relationship between teachers, and students and their families. The Cuban students speak of their teachers with respect, and consider them amongst their most important influences in life. It is completely normal for teachers to visit students in their homes and to have a friendly relationship with their parents as part of an ongoing commitment to involve the family in the education process and to understand all aspects of the students' lives as individuals. In contrast, some similar albeit far less regular measures taken by teachers in Australia, are more often considered a last stop disciplinary measure or viewed as a token check-up on academic results.

Whereas the Cuban students were unanimous in their respect for their teachers, the first comments to be made when asking the Australian students about negative learning experiences tended to be criticisms of teachers.

These differences between student/teacher relationships in the two contexts were evidenced in the first instance in the dissimilarity between the two environments in which the group interviews were conducted. Whereas at MWC the meetings were held in a staff meeting room, usually out of bounds to students, the meeting at VSC was held in one of the many communal spaces - there is no divide between teacher and student space in Cuban schools. Whereas the MWC students were keen for the door to be closed, and intermittently checked to see who was walking past before making their comments, the VSC students appeared comfortable expressing their views in front of whoever was listening.

The very different educational contexts in the two countries lead to dramatic differences in society's perception and expectations of teachers and therefore to their working lives. Inevitably such differences impact significantly on the possibilities for student/teacher relationships, and in turn on teaching practices and student attitudes to learning. Given the social prioritisation of education in Cuban society, the task of putting into practice the education system's values and priorities as outlined above, can only be fulfilled by those most committed to such values and priorities. Such an approach by the teachers themselves, in an environment of support, respect, inclusivity and meaningful participation fosters highly motivated, creative, collaborative and seemingly successful teaching practice. Despite any and all good intentions they may have, teachers in Australia, lacking support and acknowledgement, and working as Teese notes "...in isolation and essentially - in view of the deep divisions that they are powerless to address in isolation - as itinerant workers", (Teese 2000, pg. 224) are unlikely to remain motivated, and face myriad barriers to achieving such success. It is important to note, as the MWC students do that there are teachers in Australia who prove to be exceptions to the rule.

Although plenty of unpaid overtime and an average professional wage are shared by both Australian and Cuban teachers, their social status is not. Like medicine, teaching is a highly respected profession in Cuba. The VSC data suggest that Cuban students view their

teachers as mentors, whereas the MWC students are more likely to consider their teachers as supervisors.

Many of the issues raised as primary concerns by the MWC students were not mentioned by the VSC students, such as class sizes, teacher time and teacher age. According to Lutjens, in Cuba “The number of teachers per capita is now the highest in the world (1/42) and the teacher/student ratio is admirable for any developed country and much better than those that are developing.” (Lutjens 2000, pg. 11) In 1992 40% of Cuban teachers were under the age of 30, as compared with Victoria where in 2000 the mean age of all government teachers was 43, with 45% set to reach retirement age in the next 10 years (Graham 2004).

Cuban education is built on a positive relationship between students and teachers. All aspects of educational practise consciously foster such an approach, which extends to society more generally. Here in Australia, the importance of such a relationship between students and their teachers has been emphasised throughout the extensive research on the middle years of schooling, as well as the literature on civics and citizenship education. However, the historical structures and traditions which remain dominant in our educational institutions, ensure continued hierarchical and undemocratic organisation, expect conformity and passivity and ultimately block more flexible arrangements. In this environment, it is inevitable that a negative relationship between teachers and students will develop. Certainly, this study along with many others, suggests that the relationship between students and teachers is usually antagonistic, and moreover common causes of the two are rarely, if ever recognised.

This research revealed several differences in the role and practice of teacher unions in both Cuba and Australia, which impact on the development and nature of student/teacher relationships. The collaboration between teacher and student organisations in Cuba, both on matters pertaining directly to education as well as broader community issues, provides the foundation for positive and respectful relationships in the classroom. In Australia, teacher unions are largely occupied with campaigning in defense of the rights and working conditions of teachers, so there is limited time to take up the rights and needs of students. Greater attention from teacher organisations to the rights of students, to the opinions of students themselves towards their learning, and to the common issues facing both teachers

and students within schools, could contribute significantly to teacher/student relationships in Australia.

### **No more us and them**

A change is required in the way we educate our new teachers, and programs put in place to re-educate existing teachers. Primary importance must be placed on fostering a positive, respectful and collaborative environment between teachers and students. Schooling should be emphasised as a cycle of learning, where students can also be teachers and teachers can also be students. Teachers' workloads must be re-assessed to ensure adequate time to prepare lessons which encourage active learning rather than passive absorption. The existing hierarchical structures must be recognised as detrimental to positive learning and active participation by students, and broken down through teacher and student collaboration. As with other areas of educational practice, many of these proposals are being considered and/or implemented already by teacher educators, albeit on an ad hoc and irregular basis.

Students and teachers working together on school and community issues, generating collective and constructive feedback, and collaboratively discussing solutions to problems facing both groups must be at the basis of school organisation. Schools need to be re-organised on the basis of staff-student control, so that there is no divide between administrators and teachers and students. A collective approach, which fosters participation, and knowledge of the issues by all stakeholders as they are commonly called, is required.

On a practical note, James et al in *Making Connections* (James, Leger et al. 2001) make many very good suggestions regarding the timetable which would positively influence student/teacher relationships and student attitudes to learning. Re-organising timetables and class structures to ensure less teachers per student, smaller class sizes, and more learning friendly timetables which offer more time to get into a particular area of learning. Such changes should be respectful of all areas of the curriculum as valued and intrinsically important.

## Youth and social justice

In the now famous text *Man and Socialism in Cuba*, Che Guevara referred to education as a fundamental aspect of liberation, and the key to unlocking all the creative and human potential of the human race. He states that “society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school.” (Guevara 2003, pg. 216) He notes that alongside the structural changes made by the revolution

It is still necessary to deepen conscious participation, individual and collective, in all the structures of management and production, and to link this to the idea of the need for technical and ideological education, so that the individual will realise that these processes are closely interdependent and their advancement is parallel. In this way the individual will reach total consciousness as a social being, which is equivalent to the full realisation as a human creature, once the chains of alienation are broken (Guevara 2003, pg. 220).

The following description by McLaren of the pedagogic thought of Che Guevara is useful to include here, as these and other ideas of Che Guevara framed the task of education in the revolution and continue to do so in Cuba today.

The pedagogy of Che Guevara is a pedagogy of hope and struggle, and until its revolutionary ethos is felt in the classrooms of schools and universities throughout the globe, the promise of emancipation for future generations remains bleak. Emancipation and its distillate, education, are realised only with courage, critical analysis, *firmeza*, and a knowledge of history. The pedagogy of Che Guevara not only shatters the illusions and delirious and paranoiac fantasies of the bourgeoisie, but also sets the stage for the kind of intellectual labor and formation of political will that can unify theory and practice in the service of social justice (McLaren 2000, pg. 118).

This is understood by Cuban students to be a profoundly collective task, evident in their approach to learning and their activities in the mass organisations. As opposed to the competitive nature of schooling in Australia, Cuban students reward and admire most those students who consciously help others to understand as well as they do (Wald 1978).

During the process of electing delegates to the mass organisations, the candidate speeches often refer to the overall success of the classes they represent, and to strong leadership capabilities, rather than to individual achievements. In discussing why they felt happy as Cuban youth, the VSC students emphasised the solidarity which exists between them.

The ability and interest of the Cuban students to speak in generalisations and in a context far bigger than themselves, something the MWC group did not significantly demonstrate, is impressive and very interesting in and of itself. Furthermore, it did not seem to make it harder to extricate the more individual angles on each issue. It is suggested that this reflects a significantly different social attitude to the interaction between individual and collective. In fact the Cuban students appeared to find it difficult to comprehend the concept of individual in the same, invariably competitive way that we are familiar with it. Overwhelmingly the Cuban students approached questions of learning and schooling from a collective perspective.

The MWC data reveal that the Australian students, while making a range of constructive criticisms (i.e. a recognition of teachers' workload and the need to change the situation to improve learning outcomes) were unable to place these observations in a broader economic or political context (i.e. the political and economic factors behind large class sizes and difficult working conditions for teachers). While they were able to effectively explain the meaninglessness of a particular class, they did not often demonstrate an ability to consider what would make education more meaningful to themselves, or to others in a social, rather than a personal sense.

A striking feature of any conversation with Cuban school students is their spirit of humanistic globalism. When asked about their thoughts on the future, the responses revealed optimism about the possibilities for global change, but a deep concern for the people suffering in the world today. Several referred with pride to Cuba's international humanitarian actions such as the training of doctors from third world countries and aid relief to sufferers from natural disasters in South and Central America.

*I think the world at this moment is passing through a difficult period, because of globalisation, which is not the globalisation of peace or equality, but neoliberal globalisation, the increasing impoverishment of the many and wealth of the few...if we don't struggle, humankind will get to a*

*point of great gravity, where some people will be so poor that they will have to resort to inhuman actions...*

*I feel sad and anxious about the situation of many people in the world, for example the children who have hunger, in the streets, women who have no rights. But at the same time I'm optimistic. Cuba will continue, everything is possible.*

### **Schooling for Social Change**

The conclusions drawn in this comparative chapter point to the need for a radically different approach to education if we are to positively engage our young people. Schooling must be based on community needs, as determined by the community rather than needs as determined by the market economy. It is argued that a fundamentally different model of schooling which is based upon and led by community movements for social change is required, the basic elements of which are presented as Figure 14.

**Figure 14. A Framework for Schooling for Social Change**

<b>Framework for Schooling for Social Change</b>	
<b>Education as Community</b>	<b>Student/Staff/Community control over Education</b>
<p>Community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insert schooling into the community – education as community not education as production</li> <li>• Curriculum based on and organised around Social Action – active, participatory and collaborative initiatives with concrete outcomes</li> <li>• Develop critical student-advocates – contributing as individuals to a collective process of social change</li> </ul> <p>Anti-System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community control of education – starting on a local basis but coordinated to meet supra-local needs, including global concerns</li> <li>• Education for social justice and social change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democratise Schools – democratic principles under community control (rather than mere “consultation”)</li> <li>• Learning through educating – a cycle of learning and teaching in the community</li> <li>• Education as development of individual within framework of community/social needs and through active and conscious contribution to the development of community needs.</li> <li>• Situate a positive and mutually respectful student/teacher relationship at the center of teacher training.</li> <li>• Schooling connected to and led by community movements for social change</li> </ul>

While the ultimate goal of education continues to be to develop the tools that will constantly increase productivity and private capital accumulation, and to reproduce the ideology, or social values which affirm this, no educational reform can counter the inevitably negative effects this will have on student attitudes to learning. Any genuine reform has to start from the revolutionary view that students and teachers must be unchained from the exigencies of market-education and allowed to develop education as they and their communities see fit.

No amount of adopting and adapting forms of educational technique and process, however radical, is going to overcome the problem of content. The content of education has to be decided by the community as it struggles to survive, to resist, to develop and to transform

the agenda imposed upon it by the market economy and its democratic show.

Since the 1970s there has been a virtual sea of such radical reform proposals, and Zaretsky writing in 1976 offers a critique which remains pertinent today.

Educational reformers around 1900 opposed child's world of play and imagination to the adult regimen of alienated labour. On this basis reformers criticised traditional education but failed to criticise the capitalist order that produced it. The twentieth century corporate economy demands 'creativity', 'inventiveness', and 'imagination' as constituent elements in the process of production. It requires a more cooperative and socially oriented labour force and a more flexible and diversified curriculum than nineteenth-century capitalism required. Through the work of John Dewey and others the romantic idealisation of the child was combined with a programme of social adjustment. Unlike previous reformers Dewey stressed the *continuity* between play and work, and between childhood and society. Respect for the child's innate capabilities was combined with the need to educate the child to what Dewey called a 'socialised disposition'. In this way the emphasis on the child's spontaneity and freedom lost its critical edge and instead became integrated within the reformed and stratified educational system of corporate capitalism (Zaretsky 1976, pg. 119-120).

In the latest report to be released by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Long presents an overview of current initiatives in education and training in Victoria, and in doing so highlights the positive intentions of projects aimed at better serving and indeed engaging our young people in schooling and in work opportunities (Long 2005). However the emphases made in the report which was also supported by the Business Council of Australia raise very pertinently the criticisms made by Zaretsky about education as, in effect, a form of social engineering. While the curriculum initiatives and philosophical arguments stress student engagement and motivation, and an intrinsically valued learning, the projects evolving from such literature effectively become job-getting exercises. Moreover, as Holdsworth has argued they continue to focus on those considered 'at-risk' and at the margins, with statistical improvement the key measure of success, as opposed to addressing systemic barriers to success and equality of opportunity.

This gets to the heart of what makes schooling in Cuba different, not just to the experience of the Western market economies but also to the old Soviet bloc. Education in Cuba is not linked to greasing the wheels of the market and neither is it linked to building some mythical ‘socialism in one country’. Instead education in Cuba is linked to the global struggle of the poor and oppressed. It is argued that this is the fountain of its dynamism.

It is argued that unfortunately most progressive educational reform in the industrialised world is geared towards developing the capacity of the individual student, separated from the necessity of transforming the global reality that necessarily imposes itself on every individual, no matter what education alternative they might receive. While such alternatives may or may not benefit sets of individuals to some extent, it is argued that genuine reform needs to revive the ideas of the collective, not only amongst students but across all stakeholders in the education sector, and organise education for the all-rounded development of the community.

Only a school based on the necessity of social change can foster the individual spirit of creativity and construction that is otherwise at best ignored, at worst destroyed so early on in the educational experience of current students. Such a school cannot be and will not be the product of the self-critique of the existing education bureaucracy but will have to come from initiatives by communities themselves.

While challenging to consider in the Australian context, this is a terrain already well and truly traversed, with a few examples offered here as particularly useful.

Las Madres de Playa de Mayo (The Mothers of Playa de Mayo) grew out of an action taken by a number of mothers and grandmothers in 1977, marching around the Playa de Mayo, silently demanding to know what had happened to their missing children and grandchildren. During the long years of military repression (1976-1983) in Argentina at least 30,000 people went “missing”. Since 1977 they have grown enormously in membership, continuing to march each Thursday, and have become a broad social movement campaigning for social justice. In 1999 they were awarded the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education<sup>23</sup>, and in 2000 they established a Popular University, which they run

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<sup>23</sup> See [http://www.unesco.org/education/ecp/edprize\\_99.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/ecp/edprize_99.htm) for details.

offering an alternative to mainstream education, based on activism and human rights.

Quoting Juana de Pargament, a founder of las Madres, Schoenberg writes

“This history we lived, you’re not going to find it in the textbooks. There are parents that don’t want to tell their children what they lived through. That’s why they come here. They tell us, ‘If my mother knew I was coming here, she would kill me,’” says Juana. “We want to leave something for the next generations. We had a president who burned books in the street. We are now giving culture to the young people in the university.” The 1,600 students choose from 8 majors, including human rights, political and social economics, and journalism. A course on the history of the Mothers’ struggle is mandatory. According to Juan Francisco Maciel, who completed a Masters degree in human rights from the university, it is “a space for discussion, battle and resistance.” (Schoenberg 2004)

The current president of Las Madres, Hebe De Bonafini explains the motivation behind the establishment of the University.

This Popular University has the intention to stimulate critical thought and to organise broad groups of creative reflection. To articulate theory and practice, to generate tools to challenge the intellectual hegemony, to open a space so that the popular sectors and the new social movements can participate in and create forms of political construction. This cultural adventure sets out to surpass the educative practices of the system, legitimators of oppression. The university tries to recover the traditions of popular struggles, to transform society and us ourselves, in knowledge and in struggle. All the spaces of political-academic discussion that the Popular University constructs find their validity in fertile praxis that has been maintained throughout these years of experience alongside las Madres de Plaza de Mayo. The Popular University of las Madres de Plaza de Mayo integrates more than eight hundred students and one hundred and forty staff who participate in the different courses, seminars, classes and schools, all of them supported by a team of staff, moving the project as a whole ahead (Bonafini 2001).

The Landless Worker’s Movement (MST) in Brazil is a mass movement, formed in 1984 by rural workers and farmers facing repression and poverty, who sought to reclaim land and self-organise their communities. Today “...the MST is active in 23 states of Brazil’s 27

states and involves more than 1.5 million people. About 350,000 families have been settled onto their own land through this struggle, and another 80,000 live in encampments awaiting the governments recognition.” (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra 2003) The MST runs a range of cooperatives in local communities which oversee production based on community decision-making. Information from its website states that

Connected to production is education: about 160,000 children study from 1st to 4th grade in the 1800 public schools on MST settlements. About 3900 educators paid by the town are developing a pedagogy specifically for the rural MST schools. In conjunction with UNESCO and more than 50 universities, the MST is developing a literacy program for approximately 19,000 teenagers and adults in the settlements.

There are currently Education and Teaching courses at seven universities (Para, Paraíba, Sergipe, Espirito Santo, Mato Grasso, Mato Grosso do Sul and Rio Grande do Sul) to train new teachers. In addition, the José de Castro School in Veranópolis, Rio Grande do Sul is collaborating by providing training to students in the management of settlements and cooperatives, in order to train them with skills for the work being developed in settlements. Also in 2001, a Nursing course was started, and in 2002, a Communications course for MST participants was added (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra 2003).

Finally, an albeit diverse range of examples of education as community exist here in Australia, in the main in the form of religious-led schools (Christian, Islamic, Jewish among others). While these examples may not share all of the elements of community as education as defined here, they do demonstrate that many of the seemingly radical proposals being presented in this thesis are already practiced in our society and are generally considered to be socially acceptable.

### **Possibilities for Schooling for Social Change**

Schooling for Social Change here in Victoria could take many forms. The two possibilities presented below are offered as examples of the kinds of models that could inspire future discussions about the potential practical implementation of the findings of this thesis.

- The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) in West Melbourne and Thornbury, already plays a critical role in educating the community about issues relating to asylum seekers, educating asylum seekers about their rights and in English language skills, as well as playing an aid and advocacy role. A community based and driven organisation, which cuts across cultural and age barriers, the ASRC could initiate a school, open to the wider community, which seeks to educate people within the framework of a human-rights perspective. The school would operate under ASRC control, alongside and throughout all of its areas of work, involving students, staff and volunteers alike in the running of the school, the campaigns and advocacy as well as the administration of the centre itself.
- Friends of the Earth (FOE) internationally are involved in a diverse range of social and popular education programs, where education is under community control and exists as an integral part of social and environmental action campaigns in local communities<sup>24</sup>. A school could be established, democratically run by FOE in Melbourne, with a curriculum based on social action for environmental sustainability and human rights. Students could study a diverse range of subjects, and participate in the range of community based campaigns and projects FOE organises.

The key point is that these schools would be community controlled and driven, with curricula entirely based on collective social action.

## **Conclusion**

This research reveals the centrality of young people to education, not only as object but most critically as subject. This applies as much to the research of education as to its actual practice. It is argued that any exclusion of young people from either necessarily weakens the possibility of genuine reform.

It is clear that a fundamental shift is a precondition for any advance in this respect: young people have to be trusted to represent meaningful values of their own, shaped by their

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<sup>24</sup> See for example; [http://www.foe-scotland.org.uk/inter/global\\_comm\\_local.html](http://www.foe-scotland.org.uk/inter/global_comm_local.html), <http://www.codeff.cl/>.

individual experiences and with opinions of their own making, albeit shaped by a given socio-economic and cultural context. This entails young people becoming equally valued partners in the democratic process, locally and globally.

The principles and practice of Schooling for Social Change may seem unreachable goals in the current Australian context. However, it is argued that as a minimum, if young people were given the opportunity to challenge the status quo and struggle to determine their own involvement in education, by challenging the philosophical foundations of education, they could have the greatest effect on educational reform. Moreover this study suggests that settling for anything less than a schooling based on social change, will not only continue to fail our young people, but threaten to squander the opportunity we have, to ensure that the ideals of a socially just and equitable world are realised.

## Appendix 1. Questionnaire

### Participants Questionnaire

For students to complete with their parent/guardians.  
Please answer all questions which apply to you.

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_
  2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
  3. What suburb do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_
  4. How many people do you live with, how old are they and what is their relationship to you?  
(E.g. Person 1                      38                      Mum)
- |          | Age   | Relationship |
|----------|-------|--------------|
| Person 1 | _____ | _____        |
| Person 2 | _____ | _____        |
| Person 3 | _____ | _____        |
| Person 4 | _____ | _____        |
| Person 5 | _____ | _____        |

(Add more over the page if necessary)

5. Information about your dad/male guardian
  - a. Does he work?                      Yes / No
  - b. If yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. What does he do there? \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. What is the highest level of schooling he reached?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Information about your mum/female guardian
  - e. Does she work?                      Yes / No
  - f. If yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_
  - g. What does she do there? \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. What is the highest level of schooling she reached?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you work?    Yes / No    If yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_  
What do you do there? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Do you and/or your family belong to any clubs, societies or religious congregations? For e.g. sporting clubs, Scouts, Rotary etc.) Please list them here.

- Person 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
Person 2 \_\_\_\_\_  
Person 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Person 4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Person 5 \_\_\_\_\_

(Please add more over the page if necessary)

**Thankyou very much for your cooperation!**

## **Appendix 2. Australian Interpretative Case**

I learn better in a more free, trusting environment. It is easier to learn when you are relaxed, and there is no yelling, no discipline. Maybe there is music playing, and you definitely understand the subject because it has been explained well to you. Often the most positive experiences of school are being with our friends, building strong friendships.

A negative learning experience is when the teacher doesn't explain stuff properly, they move too fast, it makes you scared about how not knowing stuff, and going badly, is going to affect your future studies. It's also hard to learn when people are playing up, and the teacher is going crazy, focusing on them and not us.

The perfect school is a fair place. In our school things are unfair, we get all our homework at once. We don't get a say in what happens, they (the teachers and the principal) make all the decisions. Important things should matter, not unimportant things like wearing your pants a bit low, and wanting to listen to music in class.

We should be asked our opinion on things like how to spend school money. We are never asked our opinion. We have lots of ideas about making the school environment a better learning experience. E.g. we should start a little later, because we don't work well in the mornings. And we should have more double periods. We should have air-conditioning and heating because you can't learn when you're freezing or boiling to death. The school canteen should serve healthier food, and it should be cheaper. Lunch and recess are boring, maybe they could be shorter and we could have more breaks. There definitely should be more things to do, and more sheltered areas etc. to hang out. Kids do stupid things because they're bored.

We should have more choice, and earlier, maybe at Year 8. We don't like doing subjects that are irrelevant to us. "Choice" is pointless if you always get your second or third preference and never your first. A uniform is ok, we don't mind it, but we should be able to be a bit creative and individual too. We should be trusted to make good choices, and be backed up so that we're able to make good choices.

We should have more extra-curricular activities, especially more sport.

Teachers need to be qualified, young, and they should respect us. They should support us and help us to learn. In a perfect school doing well would be appraised, but if you stuff up you get support, not a kick out the door. We want to learn. There should be no more than 10 students in each class so that teachers actually have time to teach us properly. They should be more creative and not just teach with the same old boring ways. We shouldn't get too much homework, and the teachers shouldn't all give it to us at once, otherwise we get stressed out. The students should respect and learn from the teacher, but the teacher should respect and learn from the students as well.

### **Appendix 3. Cuban Interpretative Case**

Learning is very important. To understand an exercise and to be capable of completing it with your own skills, is incomparable. It's an immense happiness to be able to discover each time a greater world of understanding, unknown up until that moment. Knowing that you have the fortune to study brings happiness and satisfaction, and at the same time, delight in the achievement for our people, to be able to make ourselves the future.

When one learns one feels renovated, since you then have in your mind some new and interesting knowledge, that afterwards you will be able to use for good and to assist the people around you. Learning feels good because you know that you are learning something new for life, something for the future that is going to serve you well.

But, how different it is to not understand anything. To not understand, to remain blank, is terrible. You feel useless. If at school you don't learn something new to carry you forward with a smile, you feel sad and as if you've been frauded\*. Some would feel as if they were an object. A school where you don't learn is a house of boredom, and students lose motivation and sometimes fail. To not learn something new causes anguish. Jose Marti said, "A child must begin to cry when the day has passed and he/she has not learnt anything new." I still haven't had this experience, but if such experiences do exist, I don't want to have them.

The ideal school is the dream of every pupil, of every Pioneer, of every student and of their teachers. The ideal school is physically beautiful, well maintained and clean with new resources. But most importantly the ideal school should have as its grand treasure the best teachers in the whole country, with the best teaching skills, able to develop more integrated and complete students. Given this, the school in which I have the opportunity to learn, is for me the ideal school.

My school is fun, everyday we learn something interesting and new. The pleasant time at our school, we make together with the teachers. We, the students and teachers, are like one great big family. My relationship with them is magnificent, some of them are like my

friends. Whatever doubt, or whatever problem I have, they'll comment without a problem. They are always ready and able to help us.

The teachers give excellent classes in which the students are the principal actors. It is a cycle of learning between teachers and students. We like it when teachers prepare more entertaining classes and use a more dynamic approach to getting the knowledge across. Our teachers are very well educated, and teach us with much dedication. They encourage you to learn because you want to not just because you need to. So in every task we face we take a step forwards.

Of course even the best teachers in the country are people who have problems, beliefs and can let us down, if it wasn't like this the teachers wouldn't be people, they'd be robots. Also, most students are good, responsible and caring, but others always act the opposite, because while there's a world, a little of everything has to exist. All of these factors impact on and influence the ideal school, these and there could be a lot more. Given all of this, it's difficult for a complete and perfect school to exist.

*\*Fraudado* – translated literally as frauded, meaning to have a fraud committed against you.

## Appendix 4. Interview Questions

\*\*The following questions formed the basis of fluid, collective discussions around some of the key issues which arose out of the written cases and required greater exploration;

Can you think of a particular situation when you had a particularly successful learning experience? What type of environment is most conducive to learning for you?

Can you think of an example of a situation where you learn outside of school? A successful learning experience outside of school?

What does membership of these groups mean to you? (referring to their responses on the questionnaires – Pioneros, FMC, CDR's in the case of Cuba, sporting clubs in the case of Australia)

What are the themes, or values, or beliefs most important for a school to pass on to its students, during their time at school?

In your opinion, how important is it that schools prepare students to be good citizens? What does that term 'citizen' mean to you? Does your school do this? How?

Who makes the decisions in the education system in Cuba/Australia? For example when there's change, who makes the decision? Or more pertinently, do students have a role in this process, are your opinions considered important, what is your opinion on this?

And more specifically in the classroom, with the curriculum e.g. can students impact on this?

In general, what are relations like between (Cuban/Australian) young people and their parents?

What are relations in general like amongst Cuban/Australian young people? In the classroom, in school in general and more generally in life?

What careers are you thinking of for yourselves in the future?

When you think about the future, how do you feel, what do you think? E.g. are you optimistic, pessimistic? And so on...

The remaining questions were only asked in Cuba;

The magazines *Juventud Technica*, *Somos Jovenes*, *Zun Zun*, *Pionero* and so on, are they popular? Do young people read them? And where are they read?

Do young people read the newspapers, there is *Granma* of course and the youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, are these popular amongst young people?

I'd like to know about the types of voluntary work you do here as part of school. I know that you also do voluntary work as part of the CDR's and so on, but specifically, as part of school, what type of work do you do? How often? Is it voluntary? Does everyone do it? Do you enjoy it? Do you think it is a good idea, and is so why? Or why not?

## **Appendix 5. Australian Theorised Case**

Students think about their own learning and have ideas for improving their learning environment. They are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity. Students pose criticisms of schooling in a constructive context and offer solutions for improvement.

### **Teachers**

There is not enough student-teacher time in schools. Teachers do not have the time to adequately help all students in the classroom. Some teachers are *better qualified* than others. Some know the subject matter very well and can explain it effectively, others do not and cannot. Teachers often use methods which the students find outdated and uninteresting. More creative and interactive methods make learning more effective and interesting for students.

These things impact on students' opportunities to learn. Teaching approach and methodology also impact on student learning, student attitudes and student behaviour.

Respect for teachers and their authority is assumed as automatic and unquestioned. However, teachers rarely show respect for students. This is resented as hypocritical by students who often do not respect teachers. Students learn more effectively in an environment of genuine respect and trust, and would prefer it if the relationship between teachers and students was based on such mutual exchange. Fairness and respect between teachers and students is essential to a good learning environment.

Students' criticisms of teachers are not without an understanding of the context in which a teacher must teach. Students have ideas about how to improve their learning environment in a way which benefits both teachers and students.

### **Curriculum**

The curriculum is not considered relevant to students. Some subjects are understood better than others. The curriculum needs to be relevant to students to generate an interest

in learning. When students understand the relevance and usefulness of a particular subject, they learn more effectively.

Students' voices are not heard and not consulted in matters the students consider to be important, for example the curriculum. While the delivery of the curriculum (rather than its form) is more often considered, students have many ideas about what is important for them to learn through the education process. They resent that they are not consulted as part of changes made to the curriculum.

### **Choice/Respect**

School is unfair. Students resent 'rules' which do not seem necessary/relevant to them. It is a hierarchy not a democracy.

Adolescent students do not feel respected in the school environment. They are not taken seriously. Being respected and having more choice creates a better learning environment.

Others are recognised as having decision-making power, not students. Students are not consulted in the process of school change. As a result, decisions made are very often viewed by students as not in their interest.

Students are not given many choices in school. Where they are offered the chance to make choices, often their selections are not ultimately offered. The students do not see their choices as being taken seriously. Often choice is offered when an issue is not of great importance. This leads to the students recognising themselves as passive actors in the schooling process overall.

Where choices are given they are appreciated by students. The aspects of schooling students enjoy most are those over which they have some control. This includes electives, extra-curricular activities and spending time with the peers of their choice.

Students view school as someone else's place where they 'have to go'. Students do not feel connected to the school as equal participants. They do the things they 'have to do' and then they leave when they are given permission to do so.

## **Environment**

Students think broadly about all aspects of the school environment and how they impact on learning.

School is a stressful environment. It is not physically or emotionally comfortable and does not facilitate an effective learning experience. The timetable is not 'adolescent friendly'. Students can name a range of aspects of schooling which cause stress. Students have ideas about what is a reasonable workload and get stressed if they think this is unfairly exceeded.

Students do not feel as though school offers them enough support, and moreover feel that their personal and educational needs are not met at school. Students recognise that learning is best achieved in a supportive and comfortable environment.

## **Appendix 6. Cuban Theorised Case**

Learning is a positive experience for students. It is valued by them as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility. It is considered something to be shared. Their understanding of learning is broad and deep, and fostered in a social environment where learning is valued in and of itself. Students enjoy school and learn effectively there. They are able to reflect consciously on their educational experiences both from a personal and a social perspective.

### **Teachers**

A positive relationship, based on mutual respect and trust exists between students and teachers. The students recognise this as the most important aspect of a good learning experience. This impacts positively on student attitudes to learning. The classroom is considered as an exchange of ideas. The congruency between young people's lives as students and as young individual members of communities is reflected in the breadth of their relationships with teachers. Students identify with teachers as individuals, beyond the teacher-student relationship. Teachers are almost always known to students outside of school, for example as friends, fellow CDR members, sporting teammates or coaches.

Good teachers are considered critical to a positive learning experience. Students consider that a creative, practical and varied teaching approach enhances learning and stimulates motivation. Students learn less effectively and are less motivated when material is presented in an uninteresting and unchanging manner.

### **Curriculum**

Students have the opportunity to participate actively in all aspects of curriculum development. They speak extensively, and very positively of their experiences in collective organisation and problem solving from a young age. Their involvement in mass social organisations builds skills, experience and confidence, and is an empowering experience. The students participate in the analysis and development of proposed solutions to existing problems and issues which affect them in their daily lives. Such participation, ranging from

classroom based and school based discussions and proposals, to interventions in state and federal conferences on policy development, leads to the students recognizing themselves as important contributors to the process and active agents in their educational experience. The students feel they are taken seriously.

The school operates more as a democracy than a hierarchy. The students feel a sense of ownership over the school. They participate in a range of school-organised voluntary activities within and outside of school because they consider them to be meaningful and valuable to them as individuals, and out of a sense of social responsibility. The school is considered *their* school.

### **Environment**

Students think broadly about all aspects of the school environment and how they impact on learning. Physically the whole school is accessible to both students and teachers. Students and teachers collaborate to continually improve the school environment.

### **Students feel supported at school both personally and educationally.**

Resources are important to effective learning. Resources are scarce, and as a result shared and well respected by students.

## Appendix 7. Bundled Research Propositions

Australia		
Layers of Influence		Research Propositions
SOCIETY (global and local)	Economic patterns	<p>There is not enough student/teacher time in schools.</p> <p>Students see some teachers as better ‘qualified’ than others.</p> <p>Teachers use methods which the students find outdated and uninteresting.</p> <p>The school environment is not a comfortable place.</p> <p>Canteen food is unhealthy and expensive.</p>
	Political patterns	<p>The curriculum is not considered relevant to students.</p> <p>Students’ voices are not heard. Students are not consulted in matters they consider to be important i.e. Curriculum.</p> <p>Student recognises others (teachers, principals, unsure?) as having decision-making power, not students.</p> <p>Decisions are not made in students’ interest.</p>
	Ideological patterns	<p>There is a lack of trust and respect between students and teachers.</p> <p>Students’ criticisms of teachers are not without an understanding of the context in which a teacher teaches.</p> <p>Students resent ‘rules’ which do not seem necessary/relevant to them.</p> <p>School is unfair.</p> <p>The timetable is not ‘adolescent friendly’.</p>
SCHOOL COMMUNITY	Educational content	<p>The curriculum is not considered relevant to students.</p> <p>Students’ voices are not heard. Students are not consulted in matters they consider to be important i.e. Curriculum.</p>
	School Environment	<p>Students think about their own learning and have solutions for improving their learning environment.</p> <p>The timetable is not ‘adolescent friendly’.</p> <p>Adolescent students do not feel respected in the school environment. They are not taken seriously.</p> <p>Canteen food is unhealthy and expensive.</p> <p>The school environment is not comfortable and does not allow for an effective learning experience.</p> <p>School is a stressful environment.</p> <p>Students are not supported enough at school.</p>

		<p>School is unfair.</p> <p>Students resent 'rules' which do not seem necessary/relevant to them.</p> <p>Student recognises others as having decision-making power, not students.</p> <p>Decisions are not made in students' interest.</p>
	Teachers	<p>There is not enough student/teacher time in schools.</p> <p>Students are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity.</p> <p>Students see some teachers as better 'qualified' than others.</p> <p>Teachers use methods which the students find outdated and uninteresting.</p> <p>Students resent being required to respect teachers when they feel that they are not respected by the teachers.</p> <p>Adolescent students do not feel respected in the school environment. They are not taken seriously.</p> <p>Students have ideas about what is a reasonable workload and get stressed if they think this is unfairly exceeded.</p> <p>Students' criticisms of teachers are not without an understanding of the context in which a teacher teaches.</p> <p>Students resent 'rules' which do not seem necessary/relevant to them.</p>
	Parents	<p>Students resent 'rules' which do not seem necessary/relevant to them.</p>
	Peers	<p>Time with friends is a positive aspect of schooling.</p> <p>Peer relationships are often tense, negative and cause anxiety or even fear.</p>
INDIVIDUAL	Self perceptions of success/failure	<p>Students are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity.</p> <p>Students think about their own learning and have solutions for improving their learning environment.</p> <p>Students have ideas about what is a reasonable workload and get stressed if they think this is unfairly exceeded.</p>
	Aspirations	<p>Students are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity.</p> <p>Criticisms are usually posed in a constructive context.</p> <p>Students would like to be taken seriously.</p>
	Experiences	<p>Adolescent students do not feel respected in the school environment. They are not taken seriously.</p> <p>Students have ideas about what is a reasonable workload and get stressed if they think this is unfairly exceeded.</p>

	<p>Students consider a broad range of school experiences when thinking about their learning environment.</p> <p>Students resent 'rules' which do not seem necessary/relevant to them.</p> <p>School is a stressful environment.</p> <p>Students are not supported enough at school.</p> <p>School is unfair.</p> <p>The school environment is not comfortable and does not allow for an effective learning experience.</p> <p>Students resent being required to respect teachers when they feel that the teachers do not respect them.</p> <p>There is not enough student/teacher time in schools.</p> <p>Students are motivated to succeed and are frustrated when they feel they are not given the opportunity.</p> <p>The timetable is not 'adolescent friendly'.</p> <p>School does not meet students' needs.</p> <p>Student recognises others as having decision-making power, not students.</p> <p>Decisions are not made in students' interest</p>
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Cuba		
Layers of Influence		Research Propositions
SOCIETY (global and local)	Economic patterns	<p>Learning is valued immensely.</p> <p>Learning is valued as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility.</p> <p>Resources are important to effective learning.</p> <p>Learning is fostered in an environment where it is valued in and of itself.</p>
	Political patterns	<p>Learning is valued immensely.</p> <p>Learning is valued as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility.</p> <p>Learning is fostered in an environment where it is valued in and of itself.</p> <p>Teacher/student rapport is considered critical by students.</p> <p>Students and teachers impact the classroom experience.</p> <p>A positive learning environment is one in which the student feels empowered and an equal participant.</p> <p>Students are engaged in all school decision-making processes.</p> <p>Students approached research philosophically and with a level of seriousness.</p> <p>Students have a broad and deep understanding of the concept of learning.</p> <p>Students think about broader learning implications.</p> <p>Students think about the type of education required.</p>
	Ideological patterns	<p>Learning is a positive experience.</p> <p>Learning is valued as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility.</p> <p>Learning is fostered in an environment where it is valued in and of itself.</p> <p>Teachers constitute the most important aspect of the ideal school.</p> <p>Students approached research philosophically and with a level of seriousness.</p> <p>Teacher/student rapport is considered critical by students.</p> <p>Students identify with teachers as individuals, beyond teacher-student relationship.</p> <p>Student enjoys school and learns effectively there.</p> <p>Students and teachers impact the classroom experience.</p>

		<p>A positive learning environment is one in which the student feels empowered and an equal participant.</p> <p>Cultivating a sense of ownership/belonging is important in fostering a positive approach to schooling and learning.</p> <p>Students have a broad and deep understanding of the concept of learning.</p> <p>Students think about broader learning implications.</p> <p>Students think about the type of education required.</p>
SCHOOL COMMUNITY	Educational content	<p>Learning is valued immensely.</p> <p>Learning is a positive experience.</p> <p>Learning is fostered in an environment where it is valued in and of itself.</p> <p>Resources are important to effective learning.</p> <p>A creative and varied teaching approach enhances learning.</p> <p>Students and teachers impact the classroom experience.</p> <p>Students understand the curriculum and are consulted and involved in policy and curriculum changes.</p>
	School discipline	<p>Teacher/student rapport is considered critical by students.</p> <p>Student enjoys school and learns effectively there.</p> <p>Students and teachers impact the classroom experience.</p> <p>A positive learning environment is one in which the student feels empowered and an equal participant.</p> <p>Cultivating a sense of ownership/belonging is important in fostering a positive approach to schooling and learning.</p>
	Teachers	<p>Teachers constitute the most important aspect of the ideal school.</p> <p>“Good”, capable teachers are critical to a positive learning experience.</p> <p>Teacher/student rapport is considered critical by students.</p> <p>A creative and varied teaching approach enhances learning.</p> <p>Students identify with teachers as individuals, beyond teacher-student relationship.</p> <p>A positive learning experience occurs when learners feel confident that their teachers can and are willing to assist them.</p> <p>Students and teachers impact the classroom experience.</p>
	Parents	<p>Learning is valued immensely.</p> <p>Learning is a positive experience, shared amongst family.</p> <p>Students consider it important that parents support their children in their educational experiences.</p>

	Peers	Peer relationships are very positive. Solidarity exists amongst Cuban youth.
INDIVIDUAL	Self perceptions of success/failure	Learning is a positive experience. Learning is fostered in an environment where it is valued in and of itself. Student enjoys school and learns effectively there. Students have a broad and deep understanding of the concept of learning. Students think about broader learning implications. Students think about the type of education required. Cultivating a sense of ownership/belonging is important in fostering a positive approach to schooling and learning.
	Aspirations	Learning is valued immensely. Learning is valued as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility. A creative and varied teaching approach enhances learning. Students are confident of the outcomes of their education experience.
	Experiences	Student enjoys school and learns effectively there. Learning is a positive experience. Learning is valued as an individual and social asset, right and responsibility. A positive learning environment is one in which the student feels empowered and an equal participant. Resources are important to effective learning. Teachers constitute the most important aspect of the ideal school. Students identify with teachers as individuals, beyond teacher-student relationship. A positive learning experience occurs when learners feel confident that their teachers can and are willing to assist them. Students and teachers impact the classroom experience. Students feel supported at school.

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