Social inclusion
Is this a way forward for young people, and should we go there?

This paper has two aims. It considers what social inclusion could offer young people and the youth sector in Australia, and it reflects on how social inclusion has shaped the youth policy environment in Australia. It is argued that in order to consider these issues, it is necessary to understand social inclusion’s history. Using a methodology of policy analysis based on Bacchi’s (2009) approach, this paper explores the policy context of social inclusion in Europe and the United Kingdom, offering these as a comparison with Australia. It is argued that social inclusion is a policy chimera, and that it plays all-too-familiar roles in policies that target young people.

Social inclusion has now been on Australia’s social policy agenda for nearly three years. A foundation of the Australian Labor Party’s pre-election policy platform, it came to the policy stage in the light of a healthy economic surplus, only to encounter the global financial crisis, which produced a shift, to some degree, from an impetus on welfare to one on “stimulus”. At the same time, and influenced by the global financial crisis, Prime Minister Rudd offered at least personal reservations about the economic framework of neoliberalism that dominated government spending for at least two decades (Rudd 2009). For young people, the time since the election of the Rudd government in November 2007 has seen a smattering of initiatives. These include the formation of the Office for Youth, a youth version of the 2020 summit, and, controversially, the “earn or learn” initiative. In this mix, social inclusion still appears to be the glue holding together Rudd government thinking about social welfare.

One effect of the rapid rise of the concept of social inclusion, followed by the global economic crisis, is the relatively uncritical manner in which it has been introduced and received in Australia. In an earlier paper I argued that there were three potentially significant problems with social inclusion: it could be a new name for an old issue, it does not preclude neoliberal policy responses and it sets up “inclusion” as an uncontested good (Edwards 2008). This paper expands on these problems. It falls into three parts. First, I interrogate “social exclusion/inclusion” as a concept. Borrowing from Bacchi’s (2009) method of analysing policy, I then trace its history as a
term in policy discourses in Europe. Second, I argue that the Australian experience of social inclusion is most closely based on the British experience, and thus I pay special attention to social inclusion in the United Kingdom. Third, I consider the terrain of social inclusion in Australia and ask what Australia’s social inclusion initiatives have achieved, or potentially could mean, both for young people and the youth sector.

Social exclusion/inclusion: Where is it from and where can it take us?

Whereas the Australian policy discourse refers to social inclusion (the desired solution), it is more common elsewhere to read of social exclusion (the problem). Reviews of social exclusion frequently point to its ambiguity. Todman notes, for example, “notwithstanding its central position in European social policy discourse, social exclusion has no universally agreed upon definition” (Todman 2004, p.2). Øyen, soon after the adoption of social exclusion as a policy platform by the Blair government, described researchers as “running all over the place arranging seminars and conferences to find a researchable content in an umbrella concept for which there is limited theoretical underpinning” (Øyen 1997, p.63). Indeed most discussions attempt to find some legitimacy, or at least meaning, for social exclusion by linking it retrospectively to sociology’s forefathers. For example, it has been variously described as originating in Durkheim’s discussions of social breakdowns under capitalism (Levitas 1996), or in Weberian notions of social closure (Todman 2004). It is also seen as having roots in discourses of poverty. Levitas, for example, links it to ideas expressed in Townsend’s Poverty in the United Kingdom (1979), and Sen (2000) sees a connection between social exclusion and poverty, but where poverty is rooted in capability deprivation. In reality, whereas it may have some broad conceptual relation to these theories, it has no clear parentage in social theory.

The first question that must be asked is, therefore, “what is social inclusion?” In other words, what are its core components, what will it bring to youth policy, and, simply, what defines it as a concept? In the debate about privatisation we can readily determine which side derives from a liberal, laissez-faire or economically rationalist way of thinking and which derives broadly from a more Marxist or social democratic tradition. In short, when we see the term “privatisation”, we can tell our left from our right. But what of “social inclusion”? Simply, it has no real place in any history of ideas. More complexly, like a chimera, it can mean different things in different contexts.

In fact “social inclusion” had its genesis in the policy arena. It is thus pertinent to ask how social inclusion was shaped as a concept in the context of the social, economic and political issues that came together to form the policy environments in which it has been proposed as a policy solution. Bacchi (2009) argues that conventional approaches to policy (for example, Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007), which consider policies as simple responses to “problems”, fail to recognise an ideological terrain where power is manifested not only in the selection of policy responses, but in respect to the recognition, construction and framing of policy “problems”. Bacchi’s core question is, “what is the problem represented to be?” (Bacchi 2009). Her methodology is useful for a consideration of social exclusion/inclusion because it considers the way(s) that social exclusion has been “problematised”, which allow for “social inclusion” to be posed as the solution. A core aim of youth studies has been to argue that young people are frequently seen as problems, stigmatised and othered. Bacchi’s methodology is thus a potentially valuable one for consideration of youth and policy more broadly.

It is generally agreed that “social exclusion” originated in 1974 in France when René Lenoir, the Secretary of State for Social Action, used the term to describe approximately one-tenth of the French population (including the unemployed, disabled and single parents) who lived on society’s margins and were unable to participate in its “goods” (Silver 1994). These groups did not receive state-provided welfare. In this case the solution was a traditional “welfare” one,
the provision of state-based aid. Later, in the 1980s, “disaffected youth” living on the margins of society, or indeed challenging various social norms through organised street protests, were also named as “excluded” not only because many were unemployed, but also because of their perceived rejection of social norms. The proposed solution was a range of programs designed to ensure these young people gained employment (Todman 2004; Silver 1994).

This is a familiar story. Re-telling it here with reference to Bacchi’s methodology we can see that in the broader context the problem was represented to be about both marginalisation and income deprivation among particular social groups, with the proposed solution being state aid. When applied to young people, however, the problem was represented as also being about the disaffection of potentially rebellious youth, who were characterised as “poor citizens”. These young people required “inclusion” through programs aimed at inserting them into gainful employment in order to enable their transformation into good social and economic citizens (Silver 1994). This story contains the familiar themes of “risk”, poor transitions, moral panics, and the necessity to ensure the good citizenship of young people through gainful employment.

This story was later replicated in Europe, where social inclusion was adopted by the European Union as a central welfare platform in 1994 (European Union 1994). Social exclusion was considered as a problem resulting from a series of complex factors: the rise of unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, globalisation, the perceived need for Europe to be economically competitive, and concerns that traditional methods of social insurance as platforms for welfare would not be adequate to finance growing welfare costs (Atkinson & Davoudi 2000). Over time, other issues have been linked with social exclusion. These include those traditionally addressed in “anti-discrimination” contexts, such as the social exclusion of particular groups based on their disability, ethnicity or faith. However, in respect to young people, the problem is usually represented as exclusion through poverty caused by exclusion from the labour market; the solution thus posed considers a range of measures aimed at increasing youth employment and addressing “transitions”.

**New Labour: Social exclusion/inclusion and pathways for young people in the United Kingdom**

In the United Kingdom and Australia “social exclusion” had its origins in similar environments. Tony Blair, former UK prime minister, and Kevin Rudd both entered the political arena after over a decade of conservative rule. However, there was one important difference. Britain had barely recovered from a three-year recession. Unemployment was at high levels. In 2007 Rudd inherited a healthy surplus. Further, “skills shortages”, rather than unemployment, were dominating policy debates. But what a social inclusion agenda shaped primarily by a budgetary surplus and a shortage of skills may have looked like will never be known, because the global financial crisis influenced the way the problem of social exclusion was framed in Australia, and the economic means available to address it.

Since the global financial crisis, markets have been volatile and, while the worst of the 2008 crisis appears to be over, Australia remains concerned about potential recession and consequent unemployment. There is no longer a budget surplus, but instead concern about the repayment of debt. The story of social exclusion/inclusion in the United Kingdom is thus becoming increasingly relevant for Australia. In addition, Australia’s social inclusion initiatives were originally heavily influenced by the United Kingdom. This is evidenced both by the adoption of the British policy language in the Australian policy context (Edwards 2008), and also by the “poaching” of key players from the United Kingdom. For example, Tom Bentley, advisor to Julia Gillard, the Minister for Social Inclusion, formerly advised David Blunkett, Education Secretary in the Blair government from 1997–2001. It is thus a useful project to examine the trajectory of social exclusion in the United Kingdom, because there is the potential for similar policy initiatives here. Aside from this, there are other, more general, salutatory lessons for Australia that can be drawn from the British experience.
Blair’s social exclusion initiative was launched in December 1997 in a school in a disadvantaged area of London. It identified the need for renewal in a Britain where the main social problems were caused by “failure at school, joblessness [and] crime” (Blair 1997). The need for interventions to ensure employment was thus central. But the emphasis on “joined up” problems and solutions also ensured that the agenda was, from the start, much broader. Thus, it also encompassed the problems that led to unemployment, beginning with access to education, meaning that young people were the main focus, right from the inception. In Blair’s words:

I’ve asked the unit to make truancy and school exclusions a top priority because we know that the prospects for kids who miss school are so dismal. It’s bad enough if kids are missing out on the education they’ll need to get a job and make a life (Blair 1997).

David Blunkett, as Education Secretary, was charged with responsibility for these school-based solutions. The Social Exclusion Unit was established at the same time to ensure an “all of government” approach. A perusal of early reports from this unit shows a concentration on young people. For example a benchmark report, Preventing social exclusion, notes:

In the mid-1990s, [the United Kingdom] topped the European league for children growing up in workless households, for teenage pregnancy rates and for drug use among young people. Twenty per cent fewer 18 year olds were staying on in education than the EU average, and this country had some of the highest rates of adult illiteracy in Europe (Social Exclusion Unit 2001, p.5).

Thus, the Social Exclusion Unit:

… was set up to co-ordinate policy-making on specified crosscutting topics such as school exclusion and truancy, rough sleeping, teenage pregnancy, youth at risk and deprived neighbourhoods (Social Exclusion Unit 2001, p.6).

As well as illustrating a concentration on youth, the above quotes also point to another, familiar, prominent feature of social exclusion discourses as they pertain to young people: risk discourses. The implications of deeming young people, individually or collectively, to be “at risk” are well known (see, for example, Kelly 2001; Bessant, Hill & Watts 2003). Here we see an old theme repeated in the newer context of social exclusion.

A 2003 report, the Impact of government policy on social exclusion among young people, describes youth as “a period in the life course characterised by rapid and dramatic individual change on many fronts” meaning that “young people face particular risks” (Social Exclusion Unit 2004, p.3). Here, “risk” plays the important role of justifying pre-emptive intervention to mitigate against “social exclusion”, identified as the “danger” that young people must be protected from. Also justified are the types of programs implemented under the rubric of “social exclusion”. Because exclusion is complex and cumulative, it is best to begin addressing it early, in fact when “risk” is still the issue. Thus, “early intervention” strategies characterised many social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom. These included On Track, designed to identify children “at risk” from entering lives of crime, and Sure Start, designed to ensure that children identified as disadvantaged had the best developmental opportunities.

Employing Bacchi’s “what is the problem represented to be” methodology reveals that the “problem” of social exclusion was represented in the New Labour discourse to be a combination of intersecting factors including those traditionally associated with poverty and youth, access to education, employment, early pregnancy, crime, etc. The problem was also represented as one of “risk”, in that social exclusion became a new form of and locus for “risk”. Bacchi’s methodology reveals the ideological and emotive dimensions of this framing. In other words the policy problem is represented as “young people at risk (danger) from social exclusion” and the solution includes a range of programs designed to respond to this risk and danger. Also revealed by Bacchi’s methodology is the power inherent in how policy problems are represented and named. Arguing against social exclusion initiatives would seem to be like arguing against the need for guard rails on precipices. They are represented as being about preventing young people from falling into a life
of crime, poverty and being outside of the goods that “included” members of society have access to. Thus, surely they are good for young people? In fact some criticisms have been levelled at the implementation of social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom, and there are lessons for Australia in these.

The most common criticism of social exclusion/inclusion as a basis for social policy is the difficulty in measuring “exclusion” and “inclusion”. Thus, much research is devoted to identifying and quantifying risk factors, predictors, and indicators (for an overview of this literature see Levitas 1999). Social inclusion initiatives, in this context, are part of a broader shift towards “evidence based” policy where measurable (usually in statistical senses) outcomes are used to evaluate policy. This alone is cause for some concern because it may lead to yet more surveillance and “labelling” of young people, as well as being counter to recent research that emphasises the importance of research that is sensitive to context and includes rather than excludes young people and their views and voices. It may also not be the best way of understanding or knowing young people.

In addition, researchers in the United Kingdom have criticised social exclusion programs based on early-intervention initiatives because, like many initiatives designed to address “risk”, they increase the surveillance of young people and have the potential to single out individuals for interventions that may be harmful and induce stigma. A review of On Track, for example, found that identifying young people as being “at risk” of falling into lives of crime actually excluded them from their communities because they were seen by others as “problems” or “naughty kids” (Armstrong 2007, p.180, see also Armstrong et al. 2005). Viewed this is that promises of fiscal reward in terms of welfare and other payments, as well as promises of access to services as part of participation in programs, are not benign. In resource and service starved communities, participation in such initiatives may be the result of there being no other easily available alternatives.

Further, whereas social exclusion/inclusion implicitly references the social, many social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom paid more attention to the individual, both as having a “deficit”, and thereby in some way responsible for their own exclusion, and also in terms of facilitating their inclusion in society. A case in point is the New Deal for Young People, an appropriate example because it also serves as further illustration of the more narrowly functionalist elements of social exclusion. The New Deal as a total package was built on the core principle of mutual obligation, or in the rhetoric of the Blair government, “rights and responsibilities” approach (The Social Exclusion Unit 2001, p.7). Previously I drew attention to the fact that Australia’s “work for the dole” initiative had a parallel path with its British counterpart, the New Deal, despite one being an initiative of a fiscally conservative government and the other of a “new” third-way oriented British Labour Party (Edwards 2008). This is further evidence of social exclusion’s chimera-like status.

Emerging labour market research, like youth research, emphasises the demand side of the equation. In other words, recent studies conclude that it is not just about increasing the employability of individuals, it is about labour markets themselves and the ways that they produce risks that individuals, including young people, must negotiate (see, for example, Watson et al. 2003; Mumford & Smith 2004). One such example is the Transitional Labour Market model (Schmid & Schömann 2003; Schmid 2005). Viewing labour markets as inherently transitional and “risky”, this approach argues that governmental responses should account for this social context of risk. There is no evidence that the “rights and responsibilities”, “third-way” or “mutual obligation” based New Deal recognises social, labour market or “demand” contexts or accounts for this.

There are other examples. Transitions: Young adults with complex needs (Social Exclusion Unit 2005) prefigured a psychological and counselling approach to addressing social exclusion. The Departments for Health and for Children, Schools and Families have now invested between them nearly £18M in Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) programs for young individuals identified as particularly excluded, and most at risk. Such individuals are usually identified
by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) or through school exclusions. Developed at the Medical University of South Carolina, MST was not originally a social exclusion initiative (Family Services Research Center n.d.). Instead it aimed to combat conduct disorders that can result in antisocial behaviour. The approach engages a range of professionals, including those from the youth sector, to work intensively with these young people. The point here is not to evaluate this initiative, but instead to point to its focus on the individual rather than on the social in terms of the recipient of the service. Such programs also have implications for service providers. Youth work in both the United Kingdom and in Australia has an individual “case work” focus. But it is also about wider concerns of provision of social goods and social justice. Programs targeting individuals thus have the potential to change the nature and emphasis of the kind of services that are funded and the kinds of work that youth workers may perform.

Social inclusion and youth policy in Australia: Where might it take us?

This leads us to Australia. In the United Kingdom millions of pounds were invested in the aforementioned programs that targeted young people, and a robust bureaucracy was created. As noted above, in the United Kingdom the social inclusion agenda identified young people as a core policy “problem”. In Australia, the Howard era saw the youth sector marginalised and “youth” devolved, in a ministerial sense. At the start of the Rudd era, change was promised, a Minister for Youth was appointed, the national youth peak re-funded and an Office for Youth created. It looked like Australia may see investment similar to that undertaken in the United Kingdom. A new invigorated era of policy was promised, and social inclusion was part of this. However, arguably due to the global financial crisis, relatively little has actually happened for the youth sector or for young people in Australia. A very recent report, A stronger, fairer Australia, from the Social Inclusion Board retrospectively links policy initiatives enacted in the first two years of the Rudd government to the general framework of social inclusion (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010). This report also directly references the changed economic circumstances in Australia, noting that, “financial resources are limited” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010, p.2). Young people are mentioned in this report in several discrete ways; as unemployed, “at risk” of homelessness, as refugees, as experiencing mental illness and as being members of

But what of social inclusion, and the framing of this as a policy issue? Despite perfunctory mentions, “youth” is not a specific focus of the Australian social inclusion agenda outlined by the Social Inclusion Board (Social Inclusion 2009a). Informing the social inclusion agenda in Australia is a combination of Vinson’s work (2007), which concentrates on regional and community locales of “disadvantage” and that of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), whose report Social inclusion: Origins, concepts and key themes (Social Inclusion Unit 2008) set the conceptual agenda. In this latter report, children living in disadvantaged families were central, and youth barely mentioned. Further reports highlight disadvantaged localities, early childhood development, jobless families, intergenerational disadvantage (which embodies “jobless families” as its main theme) and Indigenous peoples (see: www.socialinclusion.gov.au for a full list). Similarly, priorities identified by the Social Inclusion Board include homelessness, Indigenous people, jobless families, children in disadvantaged families, locale-based issues, and employment for disabled / mentally ill Australians, but not youth (Social Inclusion 2009b). Young people may well be part of these identified groups, but they are not themselves a focus. Where they are a focus, the story is once again all too familiar, and primarily involves the other major Rudd youth policy initiative, “earn or learn”, yet another youth employment strategy designed to combat the old problem of “risky transitions” and ensure that young Australians are not a significant part of unemployment statistics. 

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Indigenous communities (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010). Young people at risk of unemployment have been a prominent theme in Rudd government discourses, and in the wake of the global financial crisis, for obvious reasons.

In May 2009, at the height of concerns about unemployment and a potential recession, the Rudd government, through the Council of Australian Governments, debuted the Social Security Amendment (Training Incentives) Bill 2009. Criticised by youth commentators (Bessant 2009), and third sector organisations such as The Salvation Army (The Age 2009), “earn or learn” aims to give young people some incentives for entering into training. It also requires that people under the age of 25 who have not finished Year 12 or an equivalent qualification participate in full-time training for 25 hours a week in order to receive the youth allowance.

A stronger, fairer Australia explicitly names “earn or learn” as a targeted social inclusion initiative (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010, p.23). Despite Rudd’s objections to neoliberalism, the report also explicitly adopts its language in terms of the ideology that supports “earn or learn”. For example, whereas “active government plays a big role” …

[A]chieving social inclusion also means taking tough decisions and insisting that, while everyone deserves support and opportunity, we all have a personal obligation to take part and put our best effort into taking those opportunities. This means focusing on the people facing the greatest disadvantage and helping them build the skills and capabilities that encourage self-reliance (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet: 2010, p.2).

Employing Bacchi’s methodology for the last time we can thus see that within the context of a precarious economy where fears of unemployment dominated, and in anticipation of a stronger fiscal environment where skilled workers are required, the problem to be addressed by social inclusion initiatives is represented to be young Australians outside paid employment. They were seen to have personal obligations to develop their individual self-reliance, in the context of a government that was skeptical of neoliberalism, but which remained wedded to the core precepts of individualisation and social inclusion.

**Conclusion**

Social inclusion – should we go there?

In Blair’s Britain much was invested in socially including young people. In Australia the social inclusion policy environment, for the most part, marginalises young people. Aside from coercive initiatives to ensure that young people gain education, skills and employment, young people have not been identified as “policy problems” in terms of social inclusion initiatives, and thus they have fallen outside the parameters of attention and spending. In addition, due to the global financial crisis, relatively little has been spent in Australia, and the government is clear about its limited capacity to invest, hence its emphasis instead on “self-reliance”. The question is, given this context, and the British experience, should we advocate for more attention to be paid nationally to socially including a range of young people? Through the methodological lens of Bacchi’s “What is the problem …” approach, this paper has advocated caution in using the language of social inclusion in the policy domain.

In considering these issues, the first observation is of the chimera-like qualities of social exclusion/inclusion, and its identity as a malleable and ideologically ungrounded concept. Social inclusion, in the United Kingdom and in Australia, is being used to pave a policy path upon which national economic recovery is considered to require young people’s participation in education, skills training or paid employment. The first issue that has arisen from this approach is that social exclusion policies and initiatives in the United Kingdom have not differed from other policy approaches in that they have led to the stereotyping, stigmatising, normalising and surveying of young people in the guise of their own interests, with the real concern of the state being its own, primarily economic, interests.

Second, social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom, and nascently in Australia, have adopted an approach of individualisation...
and responsibilisation that also characterises more overt neoliberal approaches to social welfare. In short, social exclusion/inclusion may be social in name, but it is frequently individual in nature. This is evidenced in programs such as the New Deal for Young People in the United Kingdom and “earn or learn” in Australia.

Third, the more recent social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom may be shaping the practice of youth work itself, shifting it away from a more community-focused, “informal education” approach towards a more individual-focused, medicalised model of intervention. The youth sector in Australia may do well to be wary of Australian policy initiatives that seek to tread this path.

A policy environment based on social inclusion may well also prove to bring positives for young people and the youth sector in Australia. As noted, despite their shortcomings, social exclusion initiatives in the United Kingdom did at least mean increased spending on services and resources for young people. The crucial point from this discussion, however, is that social inclusion policies are not an automatic good and should not be adopted uncritically. Social inclusion is not automatically a friend of young people or the youth sector.

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