

'My life, my future; stuck in the cloud': Challenging institutional surveillance of high school students.

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Introduction

This story is one of admonishment. Young people are being used as experiments in a frenzy of information data collection and their privacy and freedom are being compromised. When investigating the evolution of the *Behaviour Management in Schools* (BMiS) policy (WADET: 2001) for the purpose of my PhD thesis (Robinson 2011), I was alarmed at how many conservative reforms were being embraced. One of the most disturbing of these changes, I argue here, is SIS (Student Information Systems). As young people struggle to transition from school into civic and working life, one would consider that it is important for them to experience a safe, secure and democratic example from their schools. This is actually listed as the main aim of the BMiS. Serious questions arise, however, when global internet behaviour data is collected and recorded about students. For example, who owns and exchanges this data? How will it be used not only now, but into the future? Who has access to this information? Where is it stored and for how long? One thing is for certain, the students themselves are not being consulted and many teachers are left unaware of the potential damage their daily records may cause. Yet, this very private information about students is being unscrupulously collected and has the potential to haunt young people's future success in life. This is because in a 'neo-liberal economy in combination with a digitalised meritocracy...everyone has to score points' (Verhaeghe and Hoens 2011: 17). The often touted argument and claim that data recording systems save time also needs examination because instead they *create* work. Once installed and established, SIS requires teachers and administrators to collect data about students' appearance, manner, behaviour and attendance; all because it can! As Vinson and Ross (2003:52) explain, the panopticon (or spectacle) has evolved and expanded and 'become even more volatile, mutual, able, and diffuse[able]':

the scope and breadth of the disciplinary gaze have grown such that distance and space, no longer present any obstacle to the workings and effects of power—the notion of ‘regime of truth’ now implies an upward spiral in which surveillance and the power/knowledge circularity become magnified and explicitly dangerous—at once more concentrated and more dispersed, specific yet simultaneously multiple (53).

In this paper, I want to demonstrate how SIS has become the new disciplinary gaze, and that without obstacles, like the challenge presented in this paper, its powerful effects will continue to cause harm. All young people need time to learn and to grow. If many of us as mature teachers, researchers and parents reflect on how we learnt best, we can often say ‘from our mistakes’. If you couldn’t work something out and you were curious about the subject or topic, then if provided with the space and time, you could attempt to solve the problem. Instead, a punishing tool such as SIS, which records a student’s behaviour in subjective terms (out of uniform, late, etc.), does not offer any element of learning or change in behaviour. What it does do is deny students the opportunity to reflect and learn from their errors. The global SIS behaviour record follows them forever. If this tool had been used on people like me when attending high school, I would have accumulated so many records for trivial or otherwise mistakes made during the learning journey that I would not have been permitted to graduate or train as a professional. My permanent behaviour record would have tainted and steered my life and career choices. It is time, therefore, to now challenge these conservative and dangerous practices that are evolving, escalating, and expanding throughout the institution of public schooling.

What are Student Information Systems?

A definition of student information systems (SIS) according to the [www encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_information_system) is:

...a software application for education establishments to manage student data...that provide capabilities for entering student test and other assessment scores, build student schedules, track student attendance, and manage many other student-related data needs in a school (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_information_system).

In promoting the efficient marketing language of ‘managing’, ‘building’, and ‘tracking’, and claiming that it is ‘needed’ are questionable. Any search engine, anywhere in the world, will deliver an array of companies that either sell, or offer for free, software systems for schools to create, sort and manage data about their students (often termed their ‘clientele’). First, an example can be found at RosarioSIS (<http://www.rosariosis.org>), a European based package designed for schools, licensed under the GNU General Public License (GPL) Version 2, which means you can use it, modify it and distribute it

freely. It runs as a web application that can be accessed through any computer, tablet and smartphone connected to the internet and comes with all modules and translations (including French and Spanish) available to the user. The main modules 'bill students', and 'discipline' them. Another example is Classe365 (<http://www.classe365.com/>), a UK based School Management System that also caters to all devices (mobile, tablet or desktop) and has a fully integrated SAAS or Cloud powered School ERP. This system has the capacity to 'facilitate parents, teachers, students and school administrators to drive towards one goal while empowering every student to achieve his/her maximum potential'. This claim of empowerment depends how the software is used in the school. The students I interviewed, for example, experienced the tool as *disempowering*. This came about, because as revealed on the Classe 365 webpage, SIS 'alerts schools, teachers and parents on potential change in student behavior based on various inputs. As a consequence, SIS 'looks for symptoms for depression, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) [and] based on attendance, academic, social and activities performances'. Setting up these systems, 'takes less than 10 minutes', have global offices all over the world from which to access them, and at the push of a few buttons, have the potential to pathologise student behavior (Harwood 2006: Valencia 2010). My stance, from just examining these two World Wide Web software systems, becomes clear; 'globalization has stretched the effects of surveillance' (Vinson and Ross 2003:53).

SIS filters into schools

To explain how SIS becomes a tool of control in schools, I use *Anchorage High*, the case study site of my research thesis (Robinson, 2011). *Anchorage* is a large government secondary school (1200 students), and like the school I had worked in as a teacher ten years previous to my study, had many students from a low socio-economic background. Both schools also had in common a high truancy rate and had been allocated a share of the \$64.5 million funding commitment over four years to 275 schools under WADET to implement strategies related to a Behaviour Management Plan (BMP). Since 2001, all public schools have been required to have their own plan to implement the Department's policy guidelines. By 2003, the Minister of Education made yet another announcement in which \$28 million over four years was to be released for this same strategy to operate in 44 specific

target schools. *Anchorage* was one of these schools. Principals of government schools became accountable for BMP implementation. The plan had to include among other criteria; a code of conduct, describing the schools expectations and consequences of student behaviour, management procedures used to implement the code, rights and responsibilities of staff and students, roles and responsibilities of teachers and administrators regarding behaviour management, and mechanisms for reviewing the plan (2001:5-6). As a consequence, teachers were then held responsible for developing the class behaviour management plan to support the school behaviour management plan and keep records of incidents of misbehaviour (6). As these practices created extra administrative duties and time for all staff concerned, consultants specialising in behaviour management were employed and all the data regarding misbehaviour recorded and processed by implementing software licences such as (SIS), forcing teachers to participate in an even 'finer-meshed network of surveillance and regulation' (Connell, 1985, p. 115).

When I first entered the research site, *Anchorage*, the school managers offered to find the troublesome 'pointy end kids' for my 'sample'. As I was planning to conduct interviews *with* the students and not *on* them, I did not want a sample. My intention had been instead to offer the opportunity to the entire cohort of that year group (250 students). The managers of the school, however, seemed baffled by this approach because they had already generated a list of 45 students from SIS. They also advised that if I did not use their SIS system then I would not have any volunteers because the task (to take a consent form home) was 'too high order' and 'kids are apathetic' [My journal notes, February 2007].

I had witnessed many of the contradictions emerging between what was supposed to be 'a safe and welcoming approach' in behaviour management policy, quickly turn into punitive responses to students being late, out of uniform or not sitting in their seats. Sixteen year-old young people do not respond well to such actions! The students I interviewed were in this age group. Finally, I was provided permission to interview 30 volunteers from the cohort on three separate 45 minute sessions over a three month period to share their understandings and experiences of the BMP. During this time, the school had introduced a new rule about not being able to wear denim clothing to schools, and

many students were not happy about this decision. Consequently, students were being placed in detention or having to carry a report card around with them to be signed by each subject teacher every day for at least one or two weeks. Another issue which was causing a lot of discussion was related to the use of electronic devices such as mobile phones and mp3 players. The students were angry with the double standards experienced because they were banned from having them, and yet their teachers were not. When these students ran into trouble with the schools rules of conduct, then a behaviour incident was recorded on SIS into which:

Classroom teachers manage student behaviour and enter records of behaviour in class and during break times on SIS. This is a computer data based programme used to record the 'status of students' and records weekly information on student's attendance and behaviour (*Anchorage Good Standing* policy, p. 1).

The rise of data-based decision making and accountability has meant that schools like *Anchorage* collect vast amounts of information about students and most of it is not positive information. Foucault (1979: 200) explains that through this form of surveillance the student 'is seen, but he (sic) does not see; he (sic) is the object of information, never a subject in communication'. In the same way, schools use SIS as a disciplinary apparatus, 'where a single gaze' is able to 'see everything constantly' (Foucault 1979: 173). Surveillance then, is 'not only integrated into the teaching relationship' (Foucault 1979:175) but also 'becomes a decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power' (175). Hence, SIS as a surveillance tool becomes an 'integrated' system, 'linked from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it was practised' (Foucault 1979:176).

The West Australian Education Department (WADET) contracted RM Asia-Pacific Pty Ltd (RMA) a year before the BMiS was implemented (2000), to provide a web-based management system as a mechanism for recording, monitoring and reporting on student behaviour and attendance in *all* government schools. The contract for support from RMA was negotiated until 2010, after which time the system became 'independent'. At the time of writing this paper, RMA is now known as 'CIVICS', having extended from Western Australia to include offices in two other capital cities claiming to 'provide innovative ICT solutions to over 4000 primary and secondary schools across Australia and

throughout the Asia-Pacific region' and.... 'help[ing] schools run smoothly, efficiently and assist[ing] teachers to teach and learners to learn' (<http://civicaeducation.com.au>). The core administration module, containing the behaviour and attendance records, is advertised as 'fully complying with 'all national requirements'. It is easy to imagine then why schools would adopt this system. In government schools they are given very little choice. The danger, however, is that both the privacy and confidentiality of students is compromised as personal information and history of the student can be simply accessed from one school to another, not only state wide, but nationally and potentially globally. This practice demonstrates how the restructuring of global market operations 'have highly developed immune surveillance, recognition and response systems' (McMurtry 1999: 88) that 'destroys autonomy, enterprise, innovation and loyalty, and breeds frustration, envy and fear' (Monbiot 2014). As teachers become more accountable and schooling systems more bureaucratic through implementing technical apparatuses like SIS, they are also more exposed to further scrutiny in administration, record keeping and monitoring of rules. At *Anchorage*, like the school in which I had been teaching, this monitoring was done via a 'code of conduct' embedded within a 'Good Standing Policy'.

The Good Standing policy

Anchorage, like many other public high schools has a *Good Standing* policy (2007) being 'an extension and articulation of the current policy with the significant differences being the clarifications for students of what is expected of them' (*Anchorage Good Standing* policy: 1). *Anchorage* 'rewards exemplary behaviour, attendance and work ethic' and 'shows a hierarchical set of responses for positive or negative behaviours' (*Good Standing* 2007: 1). Students can be 'in' or 'out' of Good Standing. *Anchorage's* policy indicates that:

If a student has 'good standing' they are eligible for the reward of excursion/incursions/carnivals/balls and dinners. A student 'loses' their 'good standing' when they have,
3 unexplained absences or
3 negative behaviour records in any two week period (2)

The policy problem occurs because of complications arising from these systems such as inaccurate or miscalculated record keeping and the ways in which negative behaviours can be interpreted. 'Out of

uniform' could range from 'being the wrong colour' to 'having a stripe too wide', a 'logo too big' or a 'skirt a centimetre too short'. Assessment of the rule appears to depend not only on who administers the rule, but also the curriculum subject, the student's relationship with the teacher or manager, and the student's reputation within the school community. For example, having a mobile phone on in class is a rule that was okay for some but not others. Notions of what are 'good' or 'bad' behaviour are rarely contested in this system and readily determined by individual teachers and other staff. Once a student is out of good standing and 'continue(s) to fail to meet their expectations... [they] are case managed' (*Anchorage Good Standing* policy: 1).

From Good Standing to Suspension

Once students have been out of *Good Standing* (and have not been able to earn it back), it is not long before they are serving detention time, which if avoided and followed by further defiance and brewing anger, quickly escalates into suspension from the school. This strong shift towards individualising the behaviour problem takes the focus away from schools and pedagogy to the 'problem kid' (Brannock, 2000:5) who requires management, isolation and generally a 'tougher' stance so that the student does not become a repeat offender. A review of statistics of student suspensions from WADET confirms this rampant blame pushed onto the students themselves. In 1994 there were 1,630 student suspensions in Western Australian government schools (Commonwealth of Australia 1996:12), yet only three years later, in 1997, as monitoring systems and Behaviour Management Strategies became more prevalent, there were more than 12,000 students suspended (Carpenter, 2003). By 2006, 10,000 out of a total of 250,000 students were suspended, yet WADET continued to claim that the additional funding was helping to improve student behaviour and that the increase in suspensions was 'due to more accurate reporting of incidents' (WADET 2007). By 2007, 10,536 students were suspended from a total of 252,000 students (WADET 2008) and the Minister of Education stated that this increase was because 'considerable toughening-up has already occurred' and that suspensions had been 'streamlined' so that they could be sped up (1). The SIS system was assisting in the streamlining of suspensions as confirmed in 2008, when 11,417 students were suspended (Hiatt, 2009). WADET's Director-General, made no apology for this increase, claiming that bad behaviour would not be

tolerated in Western Australian schools and that the new electronic reporting that had been introduced into schools (SIS), made it easier to report suspensions. In 2009, suspensions continued to increase (12,529), yet the Director-General continued to claim that this was due to a ‘tougher stance taken on disruptive behaviour’ and now that more than half (57.2%) of those students had only been suspended once, that they had learned their lesson (WADET 2010).

Once data recording student behaviour and suspensions have been placed into student information systems, then unless the student is ‘privileged’, it is rarely removed. Students’ future welfare is not considered when ‘schools crackdown on bad behaviour’ (WADET 2008) and once a student is excluded from a public school they ‘will not be allowed into another school but catered for in a behaviour centre’ (WADET 2008).

From audit to further data collection

In March of 2014, the Office of Auditor General (OAG) assessed if WADET was effectively implementing its behaviour management approach in schools:

We cannot conclude if behaviour has improved...because of lack of information about how the behaviour management approach is being implemented or if it is achieving intended outcomes. The behaviour related data it does have is imprecise and incomplete. The five schools (out of 19) that showed positive change... had attendance strategies that worked, collected and used school behaviour data, and had a focus on improving academic outcomes.

The audit recommendations that emerged from this assessment were that WADET should improve information and data systems:

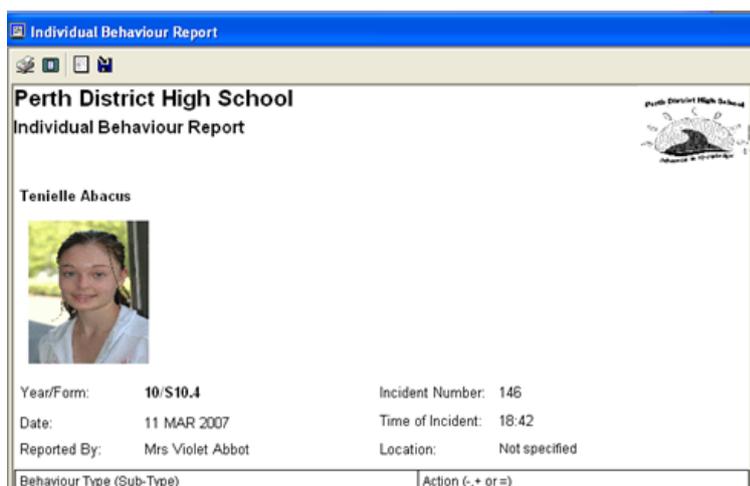
1. give schools greater capacity to record positive and negative student behaviour information and data that can be collated and extracted for monitoring as needed at school, regional and system levels,
2. have more consistent and complete information by clarifying how schools should record in-school suspensions,
3. monitor early warning signs of emerging behaviour issues so it can act before these start to negatively affect a school’s performance and
4. By mid-2014 improve access to web-based behaviour management information for schools and teachers thereby ensuring links between related policy and resources.

In response to these recommendations WADET (2014) stated that they would:

1. ensure principals, teachers and parents had easier access to information, resources and support relating to behaviour management,

2. investigate the data collection for students who, due to safety and protection reasons, have to complete their period of suspension on the school grounds and
3. Investigate the identification and monitoring of early warning signs relating to behaviour management.

Instead of helping improve relationships between staff, students and parents, the government audit and respective institutional response have resulted in greater measuring and monitoring of SIS data in order to serve accountability inspection purposes for schools' performance on behaviour management. To emphasise the reality of SIS monitoring, an image is provided below, which was provided as an example to users of WADET's SIS. Even though this sample image has a smiling face, one has to challenge how different this would be in real terms for the student. After years of tracking and profiling behaviour and attendance, according to specific codes, subtypes, and fields, the image then is more likely to be one of despair.



Source: Behaviour Management Release Notes (WADET 2007b: 25)

Conclusion

When the Education Department in which I had worked as a teacher for 30 years, introduced SIS as a student behaviour monitoring system, not only was I shocked at this instrument, I was determined that such practices be scrutinised for their lack of respect of the individual's privacy and freedom and potential to create a permanent negative record. During my ethnographic study of *Anchorage High School*, I was able to hear from the students' first-hand what concerns, fears and themes of injustice they experienced via the Behaviour Management Plan. One of these issues was that they experienced

a sense of always being monitored. Ethnographic notes written during my research capture the essence of the story I have told in this paper:

The theme of 'being monitored', especially around use of mobiles, attendance, and uniform on SIS (Student Information System), allowed me then to frame the student stories of how they had been under surveillance, what they could and could not say and do, what they could look like, speak and how they could use their bodies. The control of their use of space (on an oval only if in uniform), canteen lines, the lining up outside class, their use of time, timetable of 6 hour slots, odd timings, their breaks, even their home lives were being monitored but not as a way of explanation but as a mode of control of power. The notion of Foucault's (1980) technology of power and 'self' came to fore at this point. The use of SIS to record the students who had threatened or disturbed the peace, the quiet, the compliant unit of the classroom, the sports field, the canteen – these were the ones that had their names recorded on the data screen to be stored, collated, monitored and viewed forever. Every time they were out of 'good standing' or in detention it was recorded. And in reality what did this crime mean? Stealing? Bashing? Cheating? No...it was for not wearing the correct colour shirt, being one minute late to another boring math's lesson or talking to one of their friends instead of listening to a tedious lecture! Chomsky (2003, p. 28) states that 'this is pretty much what schools are like – they reward discipline and obedience and they punish independence of the mind'.

As schools have become more accountable and measurable to outside sources, electronic modes of individualisation are easily accessed. Even more disturbing is that in today's global world, software data systems transfer rapidly, even further afield than simply the schools own regulatory power. Directive 'Individual Education Plan's' (IEP's) and behaviour contracts issued to students have evolved from schools having to follow directives from their own Behaviour Management Plan, which itself emerged under the dictations of the BMiS policy. Principals of government schools are then held accountable to the institution, in this case, an education department. Within this audit culture, it is too easy a step to label students as 'disruptive' and as a consequence place them on a regulating IEP. In these systems, students are constructed as particular kinds of learners with deficit characteristics residing in them (Usher and Edwards 1994: 96) rather than what the school may or may not be doing to support the students. Even more concerning is that the students own privacy, confidentiality and potential success are all sabotaged by the use of data systems that leave their lives in one big global cloud.

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