Renegotiating schooling for social justice in an age of marketisation

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This article draws on a recently completed ethnographic study to present an argument for a renewed commitment to social justice in, and through, public schooling. Such a commitment needs to incorporate whole-school responses to the classed nature of society and inequalities arising from the political economy, but must also be attentive to the claims to recognition of groups excluded or marginalised through various forms of cultural oppression. Although acknowledging the importance of locally conceived responses to educational disadvantage, the article warns against the dangers of ‘romantic localism’ (Troya & Vincent, 1995) and highlights the need for collective action across the public education system and the broader community.

Introduction

A belief that public schooling can contribute to the development of a more egalitarian and just society has long underpinned school reform in Australia—indeed the very foundations of the Disadvantaged Schools Program rested on the view that schooling could make a difference for students (Connell, 1993). But there are unmistakable signs that public schooling is being undermined, undervalued and degraded as a consequence of the ‘dictatorship of the market place’ (Meier, 1995), following the ascendency of neo-liberal governments in Australia and other western societies. In times marked by the emergence of new social movements, it is pertinent to ask: What are the major discourses informing school-based responses to social justice today? What does it mean to educate in socially just ways? Are there socially just alternatives to marketised versions of self-managing schools?

These questions are explored in detail in a recently completed critical ethnographic study of Wattle Plains School (McInerney, 2001), the pseudonym for a culturally diverse, working-class school on the fringes of an Australian city—a school that in many respects is railing against the prevailing discourse of marketisation that elevates vocationalism and utilitarianism over the ways in which public schooling might nurture the formation of a more democratic and socially just society (Connell, 1998; Smyth, Hattam, & Lawson, 1998). After a consideration of the contextual and methodological issues, this paper will focus on the broader aspects of whole-school reform for social justice at Wattle Plains and briefly examine the adequacy of locally conceived responses to educational disadvantage.
Cultural and political context

There are thirty children in my class and poverty is a real issue. There are six or seven families especially affected by unemployment and they're literally struggling to find out where the next dollar is coming from. (teacher)

What are the social justice issues today?

There are several reasons why research into social justice and schooling must remain an ongoing priority. First, it is abundantly clear from retention rates in secondary schooling and higher education participation figures that an expanded education system has not led to a substantial improvement in educational outcomes for working-class students, many ethnic minorities and indigenous Australians (Connell, 1993). Such a situation appears to strike a chord with McLaren's (1994) observation about educational inequalities in the United States: that 'schools constitute a loaded social lottery in which the dice fall in favour of those who already have power and money' (p. 9).

Secondly, a growing body of evidence suggests that Australia is becoming a more unequal society with an increasing number of families and young people suffering high levels of poverty and social distress as a consequence of economic restructuring, escalating unemployment and the growing casualisation of the labour force over the past decade (Fincher & Nieuwenhuysen, 1998; Raskall, 1996). But injustices are not just confined to material inequalities: racism, sexism and other forms of cultural oppression and discrimination are still alive and kicking in our community. Moreover the historically constituted nature of social inequalities means that there can never be any real sense of closure into research of this kind. Shifts in the political, economic and cultural landscape disturb existing social patterns, produce new sets of demands for recognition among disaffected groups and generate new research questions for educators working for social justice in schooling.

Several factors are especially relevant in this context. As the effects of globalisation and economic restructuring begin to puncture the social fabric of communities, we need to understand their impact on schools, on teachers' work and on the educational experiences of students. The current reform agenda with its emphasis on school-based management has also led to a new set of arrangements for tackling matters of equity and educational disadvantage. Now, more than ever, it seems that the local school, rather than the public education system, is to be held accountable for the educational outcomes of students. But can schools do this alone? What responsibilities should reside with the public education system and the state?

Thirdly, popular expressions of social justice are now being described in a new language of recognition and difference that has called into question the adequacy of redistributive notions of social justice (Fraser, 1997; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Young, 1990). In the light of new social movements I believe that we need to know more about the ways in which schools can work towards the alleviation of injustices confronting (among others) gay and lesbian people, students with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous Australians.
‘Gone are the days of social justice’

What we are now witnessing across many western societies is a market-driven approach to education characterised by a culture of managerialism, an emphasis on competition and efficiency, and an increasing reliance on commercial sponsorship and local school funding to maintain curriculum (Marginson, 1997; Morrow, Blackburn, & Gill, 1998). This shift has been accompanied by accelerated moves towards local school management and a whittling away of support for teachers’ professional development as evident in the demise of the National Professional Development Program (NPDP), the lack of federal funding for the National Schools Network (NSN) and the reframing of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) under the rubric of the Commonwealth Literacy and Numeracy programs (McInerney, Hattam, Lawson, & Smyth, 2000).

Despite the persistence of educational inequalities in the 1990s, social justice has effectively been expunged from the discourse on education policy—even the term has dropped out of policy texts. In its place, terms like ‘parental choice’ and ‘equity standards’ have gained currency and the causes of ‘educational disadvantage’ are once again being attributed to individual/family/group deficits. A retreat of the state from the funding of public education and human services, and a consequent shift of responsibilities to parents and school communities (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997), have led to a widening gap in the provision of educational services and outcomes across public schools. In many respects, the debate about poverty and schooling in Australia has collapsed to literacy, amid a fetish for standardised testing and outcomes-based education (Thomson, 1997).

Sustaining a spirit of optimism and a language of possibility

Much of this talk might appear to paint a depressing picture for teachers engaged in grassroots reform and, indeed, it would be foolish to deny the coercive power of mandated reform. But schools are not passive recipients of state-determined directives; nor are teachers simply enablers of policy developed elsewhere (Ball, 1990; Lingard & Garrick, 1997). As Connell (1993) reminds us: ‘educational reforms eventually have to work through teachers, and worthwhile reforms have to work with them’ (p. 57) so that in the final analysis, policy is enacted in the context of schools and is likely to be subjected to various forms of appropriation, resistance and modification at the micropolitical level.

From my observations, there still exists a core group of teachers and principals whose involvement in the DSP, antiracism projects, multicultural education and a plethora of state and commonwealth equity projects, has helped to sustain a collective memory of curriculum reform around issues of educational disadvantage. There are schools which have not abandoned the struggle for socially just curriculum. Wattle Plains is one of these schools.

Wattle Plains School

Wattle Plains is a large, complex school serving a low socioeconomic district on the fringe of metropolitan Adelaide. More than two-thirds of the students come from a non-English-speaking background and presently about 50 per cent of
students qualify for government financial support on the grounds of family
poverty. The school incorporates a child-parent centre, a junior primary school
and a primary school with both principals and other leadership personnel working
across the campus. Staff are organised in collegiate teams that have a focus on
professional learning and whole school reform.

Research methodology
Although an outsider to Wattle Plains School, I had already established productive
relationships with many staff through a previous school reform project. This paved
the way for an 18-month phase of classroom observation, semi-structured inter-
views and ‘purposeful conversations’ (Burgess, 1988) with 12 teachers. I should
add that all staff were invited to participate in the project, but I made a personal
request to newly appointed staff and to teachers with curriculum leadership roles.
The discussions in three rounds of individual and group interviews proceeded from
a focus on the local school to the educational policy arena and the broader influ-
ences on teachers’ work. Beyond the interpretive nature of the research, I was
conscious of the need to maintain a socially critical focus by attempting to situate
participants’ accounts within a larger historical, political, economic and symbolic
context (Anderson, 1989; Angus, 1986; Smyth, 1994). Although my account gave
primacy to teacher narratives, I did interview senior student members of the
school’s decision-making forum and incorporated photographic representations of
their schooling experiences (notably murals and other facets of the arts) into the
text.

Sustaining school reform for social justice

We’re not scared to take a stand for the rights of children at school and the
families of the school . . . I don’t believe that schools can be politically or
socially neutral; you can’t because then you’re doing an injustice to your
children in the school. (teacher)

‘You can’t be neutral’
There is a view in some quarters that teachers no longer have any real autonomy:
that their work has become degraded as a consequence of a decade of manageri-
alism and market-driven educational reforms; and that there are few spaces
for teachers to contest mandated policies or to ‘teach against the grain’ (Cochran-
Smith, 1991). This mood of despair did not prevail at Wattle Plains. On the
contrary, there was a sense of collective agency and a widely shared conviction that
education was indeed a referent for change; that teachers could challenge edu-
cational inequalities and contest inequitable power arrangements; and that they
could develop curriculum in concert with the community. A ‘language of possi-
bility’ and spirit of optimism were apparent in school planning processes and the
forums where teachers discussed and debated the ‘big issues’ of their work. It was
enhanced through a shared vision about what was needed to improve learning for
Aboriginal students, those in poverty and students from non-English-speaking
backgrounds. Central to this vision was the notion of power sharing and the importance of developing democratic relationships; negotiating curriculum with the culturally diverse groups in the school community; and promoting educative school–community dialogues and relationships. A teacher explained this philosophy as follows:

If you believe that education is about creating a more just and better world, then you’ll have quite a different attitude to children and the diversity of the student population than one which focuses on the status quo of power. Are you going to work out being inclusive of the diversity that exists in society or do you want to exclude the people that don’t fit your notion of the world? (teacher)

**Structural, cultural and pedagogical change**

Efforts to promote socially just relationships at Wattle Plains involved a recognition of the need for whole-school reform. Although there is nothing particularly novel about the idea of grassroots reform (Connell, 1993; Fullan, 1992; Goodman, Baron & Myers, 1999), the practical and political strategies required to achieve such change often remain rather elusive. At Wattle Plains, there was broad consensus that a concern for social justice should underpin the curriculum and remain an ongoing feature of school planning processes. What this involved in practice was the development of an interrelated set of structural, cultural and pedagogical arrangements to support the development of a socially just curriculum (Ladwig, Currie, & Chadbourne, 1994; Harradine, 1996).

Structural change at Wattle Plains enhanced the development of collaborative relationships, democratic decision-making processes and leadership practices that were strongly focused on social justice and student learning. Foremost among these, curriculum committees in the arts, science, information technology, literacy, multiculturalism, Aboriginal education and success-oriented learning functioned as forums for teachers’ learning and vehicles for implementing school priorities. These structures not only helped to reinforce a sense of collegiality among the staff, but were a means of sustaining a regular discourse on socially just curriculum and student learning. School committees were required to keep social justice on their agenda and to monitor the impact of teaching practices and school policies on School Card holders, girls, Aboriginal students and children from a non-English-speaking background. Initially a member of the social justice group was represented on each of the committees to ensure that action plans and budgetary decisions took account of educational disadvantage, but this is now considered a core task of all groups.

The school allocated Commonwealth Literacy Project funds to support teachers’ professional development in areas directly linked to social justice and schooling. There was a deliberate effort to match leadership roles and responsibilities with the school’s priorities to ensure that social justice goals could be managed in an effective and educative manner. Coordinators in such areas as literacy, the arts, science and technology, worked across the school (in conjunction with curriculum committees) to implement curriculum change. As priorities changed,
so did the leadership roles within the school. Finally training and development programs articulated with the curriculum directions and objectives outlined in the school’s statement of purpose.

In conjunction with these processes, cultural change fostered distributive and educative forms of leadership, success-oriented learning and a culture of debate about teaching and learning that supported the school’s social justice ethos. In such a culture, change for its own sake was considered unproductive or unenlightened unless it could be shown that it would benefit the education of students. Most significantly, pedagogical change involved the development of curriculum and teaching practices that targeted the educational needs and aspirations of a heterogeneous school community. In particular, the arts became a vehicle for whole-school reform that gave students a voice, incorporated critical literacies and multicultural perspectives into classroom practices, and enhanced the aesthetic or affective domains of learning. Underpinning all of this was an emphasis on explicit teaching practices and success-oriented learning. I was told that ‘success-oriented learning is the barometer of a school’s commitment to social justice. If a school is addressing social justice, you’ll see children being successful’ (teacher). In pursuing a social justice vision, the school managed to maintain an internally persuasive discourse and, in spite of the many ambiguities and tensions, did not allow outsiders to derail its agenda. Although external reforms were not rejected out of hand, they were generally greeted with questions like: How might this initiative support what we are doing? Will it improve students’ learning?

Theory into practice

School reform for social justice at Wattle Plains was enacted in concert with the school community, and parents, students and staff were all involved in making authentic decisions about the curriculum. The preparation of a school development plan illustrates how this occurred in practice.

Meetings were held with the student council, the Aboriginal students group and students from non-English-speaking backgrounds to discuss the issues related to quality of education. Students also met in small mixed-age groups where their rights to a quality education were explained. They were then asked to identify areas in the curriculum where they thought they were getting good outcomes and areas which they thought needed to be improved. Students were required to justify their decisions and they used a preferential voting system to decide their priorities. Every child had six green dots to allocate in a way that best reflected the strength of their feelings.

In the final analysis it seems that students expressed a clear preference for the visual and performing arts followed by Aboriginal studies. There was a good deal of lobbying from Aboriginal children and parents to support the latter priority. Class representatives were involved in the collection of data from student groups and the whole process was used as a model for student participation in the school. When the process was conducted with staff, the two major priorities identified were literacy and science. The consultation with parents included discussions with the Vietnamese, Khmer and Polish communities as well as members of the school council and Aboriginal groups. Most parents
voted for literacy but Vietnamese parents chose science as a major focus and Aboriginal parents wanted an emphasis on Aboriginal studies.

This information was taken back to the staff for their consideration of the varying priorities of teachers, parents and students. When it came to the final voting, a lot of staff changed their vote and supported students in their choice of the arts. Apparently the student presentation had made a big impact on many teachers and, after some deliberation, agreement was reached that literacy and the arts would become immediate curriculum priorities. Aboriginal studies was also added to the plan and it was agreed that science should be a curriculum priority in future years. (field notes)

It is easy to be dismissive of community involvement in curriculum development, especially when it often amounts to little more than tokenism, but in this case the students’ ideas and decisions were taken seriously; so much so that their deliberations had a profound effect on the school’s curriculum priorities for the next three years. Responding to student voice in this context involved more than students ‘having a say’; it actually meant taking on board new curriculum directions. Parent participation also took account of the perspectives and interests of the diverse cultural groups which made up the school community. Parents were not lumped together as a homogeneous group but were able to lobby for priorities which reflected their own value positions. In this instance, responding to cultural difference revealed a concern on the part of the school for the most marginalised parents whose interests could well remain unserved if the school simply gave expression to the will of the majority. Moreover generating curriculum priorities engaged parents, students and teachers in educative dialogues about curriculum issues so that in the final analysis they could make informed decisions. What transpired here might well be regarded as an example of the ‘democratization of pedagogical and educational power’ (Macedo, 1994, p. 168).

Shor and Freire (1987b) argue that democratic schools promote dialogic relationships and, in the case of Wattle Plains, it was clear that the curriculum tapped into the ‘present, existential, concrete situations’ of students in order to integrate personal and local concerns with broader social issues (Freire, 1972, p. 68). The sense of the school being part of the community was evident in Grandparents Day, school concerts and plays, sporting events and multicultural festivals. In a very real sense, the community had ownership of the vision for social justice.

**Living with ambiguities**

One of the most powerful factors supporting a culture of reform at Wattle Plains was the existence of educative leadership that encouraged rational discussion and debate about issues of central importance to teaching and learning. Inclusive and distributive leadership of the kind that I observed was not afraid to step outside the traditional corridors of managerialism in articulating a commitment to social justice and participatory schooling and working for transformative change. Moreover such leadership was unwilling to submit meekly to authoritarian and externally driven discourses, even when it meant having to engage in ‘a politics of translation and negotiation’ (Deever, 1996, p. 256) in order to access systemic
resources for its school reform agenda. However, the capacity of leadership to advance more egalitarian goals of schooling must remain somewhat problematic in a political context where devolution is grounded in corporate managerialist goals (Blackmore, 1998; Smyth, 1993; Grace, 1995).

Although there was a recognition on the part of my informants that the school had taken significant steps towards the realisation of socially just schooling, it was tempered with an understanding of the immensity of the task and the numerous impediments to grassroots reform in the current political environment. Not the least of these involved the ambiguities associated with the school’s participation in the Basic Skills Tests instituted by the state education system in 1994. Initially the school supported a boycott of the tests on the grounds that they were culturally insensitive and of little educational value. Moreover it was argued that the school already had well-entrenched reporting practices that gave parents a more sophisticated picture of student achievement than could ever be solicited from standardised tests which simply required students to circle answers in multiple-choice questions. However, because funding for additional literacy assistance was tied to student performances, the school ultimately withdrew its opposition. From one vantage position, such compliance might be interpreted as a form of accommodation to an instrumental testing program, but it could also be seen as politically astute given the coercive realities of funding arrangements. None the less, navigating an educational pathway between externally imposed accountability measures and school-based assessment practices has not been an easy task:

We have to be increasingly clever ... we’re being judged using a similar criteria [to other schools] so a whole lot of the outcomes that we’re after don’t show up in the accountability statement. In a sense we have to do twice as much with the money if we’re really after a socially just school ... We might not necessarily agree with the structure of the tests but because we’re judged [by their results] our kids have to do well at two different levels. (teacher)

**Reconfiguring schooling—beyond school boundaries**

Wattle Plain’s engagement with standardised testing regimes illustrates the shortcomings of locally conceived responses to social injustices (Griffiths, 1998a, 1998b). 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. In other words, we have to guard against ‘naive optimism’ (Shor & Freire, 1987a, p. 130) or ‘romantic localism’ (Troyka & Vincent, 1995, p. 155) in asserting the liberating potential of grassroots reform. This is particularly so in the current climate of devolution where many responsibilities that have historically belonged to the wider public domain are being divested to local schools. Although moves towards global budgeting and self-management may create an illusion of autonomy, increased competition in a context of dwindling resources is likely to exacerbate inequalities between schools, thus undermining the ideal of a public education system.

There is no doubt that the history of Wattle Plains as a DSP school has enabled many teachers to accumulate a great deal of knowledge and experience in
community-based curriculum development. But the question has to be asked: What will happen when these teachers move on? How long can schools continue to sustain reform of this kind without an injection of new ideas and resources from the education system? Ultimately what is required is a reconfigured commitment to social justice within the public education system, institutions of government and society at large.

The task of reconfiguring socially just schooling requires a much broader application of critical social theory in the realm of public policy and community action. However, to be of practical and emancipatory value it must do more than assist in understanding the human condition; it must also offer some vision of an alternative to the present arrangements. Such thinking corresponds closely with Lather's (1986) notion of 'research as praxis'—research that is openly committed to critiquing the status quo, yet also directed towards building a better world. Reinforcing this view, Carlson and Apple (1998) argue that critical educators and researchers need to become more engaged 'not only critiquing existing discourses and practices in schools but in the formulation of democratic and progressive visions of what could be' (p. 30).

**Reimagining schooling: A vision of a socially just and democratic alternative**

Broadly speaking, reimagining schooling today means being able to articulate a socially just and democratic alternative to market-driven, utilitarian approaches to public schooling (Connell, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Kemmis, 1994; Smyth, Hattam, & Lawson, 1998). Such a vision has been variously expressed as 'democratic schools' (Apple & Beane, 1995), 'socially just schools' (Hattam, 1996; Kemmis, 1994), 'socially critical schools' (Smyth, 1993), 'dialogic education' (Shor, 1992), 'schooling for critical democracy' (Goodman, 1992) and 'critical multicultural education' (May, 1994; McLaren, 1995). Although differing in points of emphasis, each of these models offers a radical alternative to current approaches which are largely intent on preserving the status quo or, at best, seeking to modify practices by tinkering around the margins of a hegemonic curriculum.

In reimagining current arrangements, it might be tempting to revisit the past to recapture the spirit of the DSP but, as Connell (1998) explains, pursuing an alternative to present reform agenda requires more than a resurrection of the notions of redistributive justice. Although a revitalised vision for socially just schooling will need to incorporate responses to the classed nature of society and inequalities arising from the political economy, it must also be attentive to a politics of identity and the claims to recognition of those cultural groups who have been marginalised or excluded in traditional schooling as a result of oppressive social relations stemming from the racist, patriarchal and homophobic nature of society. In effect, it means taking account of new and emerging social movements and the politics of difference operating around intersecting and complex categories of poverty, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability. But it also means exercising some critical judgement about the claims to recognition and special attention of right-wing groups whose beliefs and values might be construed as a threat to the workings of a democratic and multicultural society.
What might be contained in such a vision? In many ways, this is an issue that needs to be worked out by school communities rather than distant policy makers or education ‘experts’, but there are signposts which might guide such a project. Among these, Connell’s (1993) notion of ‘curricula justice’ offers a set of principles for developing a counter-hegemonic curriculum based on the interests of the least advantaged. More recently, Gale and Densmore (2000) propose a framework for principled action emphasising the democratisation of relationships within and outside the classroom. However, they argue for a broader concept of representative democracy than that currently practised in western societies—a democracy that is much more attuned to cognitive justice and the rights of the most disadvantaged groups in the community. Kemmis (1994) similarly draws on Young’s (1990) categories of oppression and domination in outlining a set of touchstones of socially just curriculum as a basis for the implementation of strategies in the realm of curriculum, educational administration, teacher education and research. Beyond the question of differences, Singh (1998) calls for an ongoing debate about the extent of shared values in Australian society and advocates a dialogic and multicultural education which ‘seeks to build bridges that connect the concerns of one group of Australians with those of another, and seeks to build points of commonality among different groups of people’ (p. 66). At Wattle Plains, this issue was partially resolved through an annual heritage week in which students explored the question: What does it mean to be Australian?

In *Schooling for a fair go*, Smyth, Hattam, and Lawson (1998) offer a guide to prospective parents in what to look for in a neighbourhood school. Among other commitments, they suggest that parents should seek evidence that the school advances a concern for social justice, enacts democratic practices, has a culture of innovation with a focus on student learning, and a curriculum which promotes critical literacies, yet is responsive to the cultural and economic context of the community. As a key plank in a revival of public education, Connell (2002) urges a return to core values of inclusiveness and mutual responsibility through a strengthening of democratic processes. This was one of the notable features of school/community dialogue at Wattle Plains where Aboriginal parents not only designed the activities for the annual NAIDOC Week, a celebratory event organised by the National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee, but were also involved in an ongoing cultural studies program with the school in which they shared their heritage and experiences of racism with students.

Because education cannot be regarded as ‘the lever for the transformation of society’ (Shor & Freire, 1987a, p. 130), the struggle for more socially just schooling needs to extend beyond the classroom to the wider society. Writing about school renewal in inner-city schools, Anyon (1996) argues that educational reform must be accompanied by other more fundamental social changes aimed at reinvigorating the political, economic and cultural life of communities. By forging links with youth organisations, human rights groups and community action programs, educators and school communities are more likely to be able to develop the necessary political clout to combat injustices at the local and regional level. In an effort to combat an insidious campaign of racial vilification, Wattle Plains joined
forces with a local government-sponsored Coalition Against Racism and helped to coordinate community forums, home visits and antiracism workshops.

Conclusions

In spite of the coercive nature of external reforms, hegemony is never complete. The experience at Wattle Plains shows that it is still possible for teachers and school communities to exercise a degree of autonomy in pursuing grassroots reform for social justice. It suggests that when schools develop a courageous educational vision in concert with the community, when they create the spaces to sustain a culture of debate about teaching and learning, and where distributive and educative forms of leadership prevail, there is a real possibility of enacting a socially just curriculum—even when the very notion has been evacuated from official policy. This is not to deny the tensions and ambiguities confronting schools as they attempt to rail against the worst excesses of a managerialist discourse, nor is it to diminish the responsibility of the state and education centre to provide the necessary resources and leadership to ensure a more equitable public education system. Although it may be wishful thinking in the current political climate, it is imperative that educators and school communities lobby state and federal governments to reinset social justice principles into all aspects of policy making and to direct resources to support the educational aspirations of the most disenfranchised students.

Perhaps the notion of a socially just school will always remain a utopian vision—an ideal to be struggled for, rather than an achievable goal. But, as Freire (1972) has argued so passionately, history is never foreclosed; the future is not written large in the sky; human agency does exist and alternative pathways are possible. Schooling, for all its flaws, still offers the greatest hope for changing the hearts and minds of Australians as we seek to advance reconciliation with indigenous peoples and foster the development of a truly compassionate and socially just society.

Keywords

curriculum educational policy ethnography government schools justice social attitudes

References


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