

Generations of Social Justice in Australian Schools?

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NB: This paper is a companion piece to Lew Zipin's (ZIP05584) presented at this conference and should be read in conjunction with it to make most sense.

This paper aims to reflect on different approaches to social justice taken up in Australian schools as part of developing our thinking in the ARC Project Redesigning Pedagogies in the North, a Northern Adelaide-based linkage project with partners of the 10 high schools in the northern Adelaide area, the Australian Education Union, the Social Inclusion Unit of the SA Government and UniSA. This project, as other papers in the symposium clarify, is a curriculum and pedagogy-focussed research network aiming to redress actively the low levels of engagement and success experienced in the ten schools. It aims to build on the learnings of multiple generations of Australian educational initiatives in exploring cul-de-sacs and promising leads.

As Zipin noted in his paper, the tension between redistribution and recognition has been a central contradiction in all our moves to institute and redress social injustice in education settings. Most of the initiatives, we argue in this paper, fall into one of three main approaches, with a fourth, the 'both/and' approach rarely even aimed for, let alone achieved or articulated. Most of the initiatives tend to come down on one side of the contradiction rather than the other, rather than taking seriously the 'madness' of trying to undertake the ethical imperative of attempting the impossible of BOTH dimensions of the tension.

The three approaches can be summarised as:

1. Give the kids the codes
2. stuff the codes: give their intelligent relevance
3. give them enriched vocationalism.

In this paper, we explore each of these in turn through the lens of the redistribution-recognition tension, and finish with some explorations of the consequences at the school level. This we emphasise is a work in progress rather than a finely crafted discussion. However, we have found it helpful in considering the different foci of the schools in the project and in projects we have known and worked in at other times and spaces.

GIVE THEM THE CODES

This impulse proceeds from a strong sense of the historically accumulated extent and staying power of processes of structural inequality, codified in institutional sorting & selecting mechanisms. Thus there is a push to analyse those mechanisms, and redress them at the level of the coded mechanisms. Bourdieu & Passeron of course offer important analysis in this regard; but Bernstein comes most to mind (and perhaps projects such as 'systemic-functionalist linguistics') because (a) his work has an acute

focus on ‘codes’ and their reproductive dynamics within the ‘three message systems’ (curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) and, by extension, the ‘hidden curriculum’ of processes; and (b) there is perhaps a more thought-out focus on the results of interventional strategies.

We don’t have time/space to elaborate such strategies here. The key point is that this approach proceeds from code-focussed analysis of how power-elite groups are privileged in institutional staging of performative competitions for academic ‘success’ and ensuing credentialed access to life chances (More can be said on this through authors such as Roy Nash or Raymond Collins). That is, such analysis at the level of codes prompts impulse to redistribute the ‘winning’ codes to those who do not inherit them through an accident of birth. The focus is on (re)designing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment so as to redistribute code-cracking cultural capitals so as to beat the ‘capitalist’ Caesar at the ‘winner’ versus ‘loser’ game.

Such projects recognise that institution-based codes of ‘vertical’ (hierarchical) discourse are culturally arbitrary and unjustly assimilative, thus encroaching on codes of ‘horizontal’, lifeworld discourse that, for all but power-elite groups, are different from school-valorised codes. There is thus attention to where, in knowledge and process dimensions of schooling transaction, the latter can be used to support learning of the former. Still, the tendency is to enrol the horizontal in support of redistributing the vertical.

Many projects along these lines – such as much bilingual/bicultural literacy learning – end up taking such assimilative directions, i.e. scaffolding that doesn’t preserve the home culture it starts from, but drops this when/as elite code capacities take hold. However, raised consciousness can occur through making the codes explicit, and code-switching capacities can be built – as more often happens in projects with a strong focus on redressing academically competitive ‘disadvantages’ of marginalised race-ethnic groups.

A key virtue, then, is the stress on – and strategies for – taking responsibility to make power-elite codes explicit and learnable. However, a problem can be that the prominence given to elite hierarchic codes can simply be too alienating in terms of identity structures of non-elite ‘others’ and so, even when codes are made explicit and practicable, they may be resisted. Another problem can be that, despite being motivated by critique of arbitrary unfairness of ‘standardised’ institutional installations of power-elite codes, it’s hard to build that critique into classroom teaching-and-learning. That is, when focussed so strongly on learning to compete in the ‘capitalist’ reproduction game, it becomes difficult to make critique of this game a part of educational practice.

In terms of the core contradiction between recognition and redistribution, we might sum up by seeing the “give them the codes’ approach as not improperly in awe of the power of the ‘capitalising’ game, such that the impulse is to render too much unto Caesar through redistribution; while, correlatively, more utopian impulses to preserve multicultural identity and marshal it to transform the institutional power game of schooling, when present, tend to be relegated to second fiddle.

In our project, one high school attempts to be the IB (international Baccalaureate) school of ‘the north’. There can only be one; and it has dangers, in a competitive market context, of creaming off those within the area who already embody relatively more powerful cultural capitals, rather than truly redistributing the codes to those with ‘lesser’ inheritances.

STUFF THE CODES: GIVE THEM INTELLIGENT RELEVANCE

This impulse proceeds from a strong sense of the indecency that there is such a thing as ‘dominant culture’ encoded in so-called ‘standards’ of schooling, such that culturally diverse others must rise or fall against how well they measure up to the arbitrary and undeserved power of the elite few. Further, it starts from an acute distaste for how toxic, injurious and genocidal this institutionalised domination is to other people’s cultural ways and identities.

Thus there is more impulse to refuse to render unto Caesar: to seek to free children and communities of non-elite social-structural positioning from curricular and pedagogical subjugation to the dominant cultural arbitrary, and instead to uphold and valorise their social-cultural knowledge forms, contents and learning processes, and their identity formations. Perhaps the strongest Australian exemplar is Connell’s critique of CAC (competitive academic curriculum) and his push for ‘counter-hegemonic curriculum. Rather than try to scaffold ‘other people’s children’ (Delpit) into more familiarity with and prowess in the codes of elite positions, this position valorises local lifeworld ways of knowing/being/identifying, by building rich-task challenges to intelligence around these. Other prominent examples including Freire, Italian rural Marxist/Jesuit schools such as Barbiana, and more.

A virtue is avoiding the alienation that comes from privileging the culturally unfamiliar and arbitrary, instead gaining student engagement in a curriculum appeal of familiar and relevant connection to their ways of knowing/acting/identifying. What Pat Thomson calls the ‘virtual school bag’ kids bring from their home lifeworld is opened at school. That is, habitus is valorised rather than negated, in ‘doing justice’ to from lifeworld-centric recognition and use of learning assets to be engaged and developed further, rather than CAC-centric perception of deficits to be made up by replacing/displacing lifeworld-based dispositions.

Another virtue in this approach is preserving a stance from which not to be ‘fooled’ by the power game that can’t really be won by many. Codes that are redistributed to very many end up losing their exchange value of ‘capital’; the logic of capital is then to transfer investment of exchange value to new modes of ‘accumulatable’ code. After all, the deep-structural historical accretion of capitalising logic has persistently mobilised immense infra-structural ways and means, including deep complicity of those in positions of power-disposed habitus, to consolidate new stratifying mechanisms to replace those under challenge. Despite individual mobility, class/race-ethnic/gender structures of differentiation persist with help, in schooling, of reproductive mechanisms both numerous and subtle. There may be local examples of serious ‘redistribution’ to groups (e.g. Central Park East in NYC); but these end up ‘exceptions’ which can be used not only to prove but to justify ‘the rule’.

So, this position starts from the question: why not turn our backs on playing the game that can’t be won and instead work from cultural knowledge that carries rich use

values rather than narrow exchange value? More than this, it offers the possibility of building into schooling a serious and sharp critique of the game: instead of rendering unto Caesar, expose Caesar's game of stacked rules, and begin to imagine, and live, better institutions for a better society in which learning is about meaningfully intelligent use values, not accumulation of meaningless exchange values. This approach calls on adherents to valorise a curriculum for healthy lives and multi-cultured identities, rather than for accumulating positional power. A 'utopian' impulse in this to build the diverse communities of 'the many' into a critical-mass challenge to the hegemony of 'the few', persuading and working not just with kids but parents, community members.

And who can argue with this impulse of ethical pursuit of 'the way it ought to be, and could if enough of us are willing'? In the '70s and into early '80s there were supports for significant exemplars in schooling along such lines, but they have been little able to sustain such utopian momentum (as Connell et al well describes in their writings on 'disadvantaged schools program'). There's certainly no school in Adelaide northern suburbs about to embrace this impulse at present. [Perhaps, in a way, Para West's adult program, in dealing with re-entry students terribly wounded by past experiences with toxic humiliations of schooling and so needing culturally inviting nurture of confidence/esteem could be seen to work from this starting point.]

In terms of the core contradiction, we might sum up by seeing this approach as not improperly against being over-awed by power of 'capitalising' game, and for giving due respect to surviving and thriving of multi-cultural identities in the best possible ways. However, it is without an operative balance of sufficient awe of the staying power of codified capitalising logic, and moreover, without sufficient appreciation of how life chances depend on this game.

GIVE THEM ENRICHED VOCATIONALISM

This impulse involves strong regard for the power of the credential-society function of schooling, with differentiated degrees as passports to different life chances. It also involves strong regard for the obstacles of the stacked game of 'properly academic' competition as faced by those from positions of less powerful cultural capital inheritance.

Teese and Teese and Polesol offer the strongest argument and plan for this approach. They see the power-elite students as having both extrinsic and intrinsic advantages that need redress. Extrinsic advantages accrue at the level of strategic dispositions within habitus: power-elite kids know that school is set up for them to 'win' through CAC game. Intrinsic advantages lie in the fact that curriculum contents and pedagogic interactions are, for them, more rewarding than for non-elite kids who, in streaming processes, get curriculum and pedagogy that are not only irrelevant to them but usually 'dumbed down'.

Redress of this problem of extrinsic reward gap, for kids with less inheritance of cultural capitals for academic success, is seen as less *per se* an academic regimen, with academic skills built more around vocationally oriented, 'hands on' school activities. Non-elite students thus earn different kinds of credentials; but – and this is crucial – those credentials do get their earners somewhere on pathways into tertiary

vocational institutions/programs of newly fortified quality and status. Thus, what results are different sorts of students, but no longer with the stigma of 'loser' students.

Extending the Teese/Polesol pitch a bit, the problem of the extrinsic reward gap can be addressed both by scaffolding more appropriate 'academics' around the hands-on vocational studies, and by enriching vocational studies. For example, not just studying 'skills for work', but also the changing nature of workplaces, experiences with work, etc – borrowing from Freire/Shor type bags of tricks to build rich kinds of use-value and critical literacies, alongside rendering unto Caesar in terms of credentialism. This is one way around the worrying tendency, in such approaches, to reinforce the notion that people in non-elite positions are more 'hands on' by dispositions (which can easily slip into 'natures'), and less dispositionally oriented to 'intellectual' challenge – rather than differently oriented to intelligent challenges.

Again, the success of this approach requires a politics of making vocational credentials of less 'lower capital' significance than they currently are. That's a very 'iffy' political project within the current historical context and can be seen to deny the extent of the formidable logic of differential accumulation of capitals and associated credentials. It's more likely that schools with less powerful clientele will find themselves competing with each other for placements of their students in apprenticeships and other job pathways that are available; and also that this will reinforce credentialism all the more – i.e. it will all the more disadvantage those who don't manage to gain school credential – who might be just as capable of handling jobs that those with the credentials end up gaining a secure lock on through schooling degrees that don't truly signify greater job skills (Collins). Also, it may cooperate too much with the trends that in which those perceived as 'non-academic' are 'sentenced to lifelong learning' (McWilliam) at a bottom-feeding level of job structure, without much upward mobility. Moreover, there are issues about which 'others' this works for: female as much as male? race-ethnic others as much as white working-class?

Still, how can this approach be denied in a school like one in our project in Adelaide northern suburbs, which, as the only category 1 disadvantaged school in the state, has sent only 6 students to University in the past 7 years. Right now, the vocationalist approach at this school is not engaging students, not convincing them – as offspring sometimes of three generations of unemployed parents – that it will make a difference. However, done well it could represent a healthy and sensible aspiration toward intrinsic engagement combined with pathways of extrinsic motivation, contributing to cultural shift with regards to 'learning to learn' such that cohorts of further generations might place more than 6/7ths of a student per year at University.

In terms of the core contradiction, we might sum up by seeing this approach as sliding between a due regard for the formidable power of the 'capitalising' game, and a respect – if problematic – for differences. Its accommodation is more toward the latter than the former, but takes on something of a 'both/and' that is bowed by pragmatic weights.

CONCLUSION: APORETIC MADNESS OF SOCIAL-EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

Over the years of struggling against socially unjust schooling, we have begun to understand what is at stake in our various approaches. There is no 'right answer' to what might be the most appropriate set of strategies but there are now more clearly

understood problems in any single approach. We do not have the luxury of believing that any one resolution of the tension can make a systematic and sustainable difference. Thus, the *aporia* of a ‘both/and’ approach is clearly needed.

Yet in a practical sense, schools are in a bind. Those which tend to allow a plethora of initiatives do not seem to work well. For example, a school may have a middle schooling high relevance approach, plus a VET in schools initiative, plus a high ICT standard. Most schools resolve the lived tensions among these by a silo effect, high boundaries between initiatives, often leaving the mainstream unaddressed. Such smaller scale initiatives tend to be very person dependent, and to be unable to deal with the wider school-level problems for significant cohorts. They seem to last as long as there is a reliable leader or some funding. Letting the several flowers bloom, as we did in the 70s, is thus not a realistic way to avoid the tensions or counter-balance them in the one site or the one district. It can also have an effect of disintegration and internal competition for funding and allegiance. However, it can also allow an initiative to grow long enough to gain adherents and see outcomes change, such that it could grow into a whole school approach. At the other extreme, a school which appears to have a singular message, or alignment such as an IB, a specialist focus, tends to rely on differentiation from other local schools, and to assume continuity when the circumstances may have changed.

There is a challenge in the current pressure to perform well publicly on standardised measures. It might be that the residual schools will be thrashed into new benchmarks and performance or perhaps be given space, as no-one expects more than custodial duties. The space to innovate would of course be the better option, but again tends to allow the schools in that grouping to remain marginalised. For teachers in such schools, many of whom tend to be younger (given staff turnover in the most difficult settings) the challenge to explore and articulate this debate of the core contradiction in social justice work can be offered through professional dialogue, memory work among the older teachers involved and committed, and by considering the longer term experiences of generations of students at local schools.

In the current massively unequal context, to undertake any interruption of ‘schooling as usual’ is already a madness – we have seen so little change in the patterns of achievement and the growth of life consequences for the gaps in achievement and credentials in the past thirty years. Yet teachers, and researchers, do need to take on the Derridean consummation about recognising the practical impossibility of pursuing strong social justice, yet the ethical imperative of trying to do so even as we accommodate to capital. This is a ‘hyperbolic’ ethical responsibility to be ‘mad’: i.e. to leap into the breach of the tension by trying to make possible the never to be possible, pursuing a justice ‘to come’ as if it somehow is on our horizon when this can never be achieved in institutional concreteness of any sort, ever. Yet, taking the ethical responsibility of this mad pursuit is the only way that institutional schooling could come about that is ‘better than otherwise’.
