

The Strangler Fig: Teacher education, social justice and ethnically marginalised students.

Barry Osborne

James Cook University of North Queensland, Cairns Campus.

In this paper, I make brief cases for an urgent need to address increasing inequality in Western democracies and for education to play a role in tackling it. On the basis of Connell (1989) frame of curriculum as content, classroom processes, assessment and the wider social processes within which they are located and in the context of what Apple (1986) called work-intensification, I also make a case for locally initiated micro and macro reform. I then position myself as a teacher educator with an ethnographic research background who is committed to emancipatory social justice, particularly for ethnic groups we have marginalised, to highlight some of the tensions inherent between such positionings and my commitments to both teacher empowerment and using best research to signpost possible changes. A challenge then becomes how emancipatory social justice can be worked towards in the context of these tensions. My suggested resolution involves a praxis between research-based signposts informed by culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1991, 1992; Osborne, Singh, Cooper and Nakata, in progress), the notion of schools organic to their local communities (Connell, Ashenden, Dowsett and Kessler, 1982), and mutually educative dialogue between educators and parents (Kalantzis, Cope, Noble and Poynting, 1990) to produce new forms of authority in a participatory democracy (Giroux, 1989). The analogy I propose is that of the strangler fig tree, which from a seed (composed of all these components) creates new space for itself within the forest.

INEQUALITY IN SOCIETY AND SCHOOLING

‡The extent of economic inequality is well documented and hardly needs restating. In the United States in 1989, West (1994: 10,11) reported that 1% of the population owned 37% of the wealth, and 10% of the population owned 86% of it, leading to a profound cynicism of the citizenry. He also stressed that workers wages had dropped by twenty percent over the last twenty years (p. 9). Kozol (1992) also painted a grisly picture of rampant exploitation of the powerless and poor in the United States. One example was East St Louis: 98% black, with no obstetrics services, no regular trash collection, and few jobs. Nearly a third of its families live on less than \$7 500 per year; 75% of its population live on welfare of some form. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development described it as the most distressed small city in America (Kozol, 1992: 7).

He went on to expose similar gross inequalities in East Chicago; New York; Camden, New Hampshire; Washington, DC; and San Antonio, not only in fam

ily incomes but also in terms of educational funding. There are attendant inequalities in provision of community health/hygiene, access to medical treatment and rates of arrest and imprisonment that are systematically biased against the poor, who are often from ethnic groups we have marginalised. Both these recent books are national best sellers, so public awareness of the extent and growth of inequality should be high.

In Australia, many (Connell, Ashenden, Dowsett and Kessler, 1982; and see the volumes by Hatton, 1994 and Connell, White and Johnston, 1991) have noted the gross inequalities within our society. Attempts to redress them continue, with limited if any success. For example, there have only been three years this century when the gap between the wealthy and poor did not grow (the Whitlam years). Indeed Castles (1992: 244) indicate

d that while the top twenty percent of Australians earned 43.9% of all income in 1981-2, by 1989-90 this percentage had risen to 46.7% while the share of all other deciles had fallen by between .2% and .7%. Had the Disadvantaged Schools Program, ABSTUDY, Aboriginal Secondary Education Grants not run through the 1980s it is conceivable that even greater inequality would exist in Australia now. But inequality continues to thrive into the nineties (Connell, White and Johnston, 1991: 23) and recent migrants, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders continue to bear the brunt of its debilitating pressures. For instance, in 1992 unemployment among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders was 70%, more than six times the national average.

I do not subscribe to the rhetoric that the problem is that schools fail to prepare young people for the workforce, although this contributes to the crisis. Public schooling as we know it was set up last century to serve the needs of commerce and industry (Carnoy, 1974). As we moved into a late or post industrial phase from the early 1970s, schools have not substantively accommodated this fundamental, irreversible, and accelerating change. Schools have broadened subject offerings and in so doing made some new subjects more attractive to students, but few of the many new subjects have any real payoff for students. Schools have changed their forms of management to be more participatory, but devolution can be merely a cost-cutting measure devised by government (Smyth, 1994). In fact, schools have been under massive pressure to do more of the same - back to the basics, improve standards, stronger discipline. Furthermore, new initiatives from government reach schools at rapid intervals, leading less to basic change than to teachers work intensification and deskilling (Apple, 1986). Indeed work intensification, deskilling, and the pressure from above to be better technicians tend to divert teachers attention away from critical reflection about teaching and how to improve either it or schooling in a genuine struggle for social justice (Zeichner, 1993). Hence, I see schooling as only part of the crisis to be tackled.

Structural inequality in society existed well before public schooling began and schools were designed, despite public rhetoric to the contrary,

to maintain the powerful positions of the powerful and their offspring, that is to sustain inequality by way of education (Connell et al., 1982 : 189). In times of economic growth the vast majority of school leavers found work. Year nine was enough to get a good trade during the 1950s when I was in high school and there was plenty of work in factories and labour intensive fields like the sugar and wheat industries, road construction, and mining (see also Luke, 1993). Now, with massive automation, changing markets (and their rapidly changing playing fields), and economic rationalism running rampant, we have structural unemployment of an unprecedented kind coexisting with schooling formed for a vanished era.

Hence, I contend that society and schools are in crisis. Conservatives argue that what we need to do is to reestablish standards, values, and discipline to recreate the law and order they ascribe to a bygone golden era, so their position is that we need more of the same only done better. Better teaching, better policing, better laws to punish offenders and protect property, and better family life to encourage respect for elders are the kinds of solutions they propose. However, these solutions derive from a past that lacked some of the complex dilemmas we face. For example, it is possible to argue that increasing inequality within a highly advertised consumer society where credit is sold as a commodity encourages crime against property and fraud. While individuals should be held accountable for such crimes, my point is that continual exposure to the glossy advertising of our consumer products and services encourages those with no legitimate ways to obtain them to find illegal ways to do so. Then toughening laws and recruiting more police to the beat are only band-aids for a deeper malaise. Increasing the legitimate employment of y

oung people (and older unemployed people) in the workforce, while dampening consumer expectations seem to be essential to tackling the latter while also conserving our rapidly diminishing non-human resources. Rather than pursuing ever increasing economic growth to sustain improving standards of living, this means at least capping standards of living, with other than workers and the unemployed sharing the burden too. And this is not only an unpopular position, it is one that is likely to be resisted by parents who rightly look to schools to provide their own offspring with the best life chances possible.

So, while our schools, like society, are in crisis they are also in non-crisis as many expect them to deliver on the myths schools and society have proclaimed for many decades. One of those myths was: those who work hard and who have the ability will reap the rewards - the individualist meritocracy myth. While it delivered for me and many of my peers at school, it also succeeded in controlling others who came to see themselves as lacking ability and/or application and therefore undeserving of school success and societal rewards. So much for another myth - schools maximize the potential of every child. Meritocracy was partly defensible when economic growth supported jobs growth. Now that structural unemployment is high and competition for jobs is frantic, even successful high sc

school students doubt they will get places in preferred university courses and if they do whether employment will follow graduation. At a workshop I attended in 1993, the cream of final year students from private and public high schools on the Atherton Tableland made these very points. Giroux (1994: 289) made a similar claim about U.S. youth: in the sixties and seventies a radical fringe was disillusioned by society, now a whole generation is. In a similar analysis applied to African Americans, West (1994: 22-23) argued that:

nihilism ... increasingly pervades black communities. Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; rather it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most importantly) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. Life without meaning, hope, and love breeds an oldhearted, mean-spirited outlook that destroys both the individual and others.

He argued that the ghastly cutbacks [by conservative governments for services to the poor] are one cause of the nihilist threat to black America (p. 22). It seems to me that increasing inequality is ultimately destructive of our society. So, not only is it humane to work for emancipatory social justice as a basis for participatory democracy, the survival of our very societies may depend upon it. It is not that schools alone can redress inequality (economic and social capital continue to favour the already powerful) but at least schools can legitimate the cultural capital students bring to school and make explicit the symbolic capital that supports each of these three forms of capital and hence power (Luke, 1993). This ongoing critique of power means that participatory democracy is nurtured in schools and inequality is challenged.

THE NEED FOR BOTH MICRO AND MACRO REFORM

If schools are to tackle educational inequality as it affects ethnic minorities we have marginalised, then there is a need for both micro and macro reform. At the micro level there is a need for changes to curriculum content, classroom processes and the social practices (including assessment) within schools that frame each of these aspects of curriculum (Connell, 1989). For these changes to occur within schools, macro level s

upport for each is needed particularly as curriculum content, assessment and some wider social practices they occur within are constrained, even dominated, by forces outside the school.

Changing Curricula to Contest the Current Narrowly-Based Hegemony

A number of authors have highlighted the ways in which particular conte

nt is selected and accounted as powerful in school curricula (Young, 1971; Bourdieu, 1986; Connell, 1985 and 1989). Indeed Connell (1989) argued for a curriculum to invert the hegemony put and held in place by a powerful few:

capitalists and professionals, men, Anglos (p. 125) - a very small minority in our society. He argued that such curricula are more inclusive, more accessible, more generalisable and inherently better than ones which perpetuate the existing hegemony.

Inverted curricula have been developed and introduced in schools (e.g. Osborne and Carpenter, 1993 describe year eight History and year nine Geography written by Anglos, and strongly vetted by Torres Strait Islander leaders, from as much as possible a Torres Strait Islander point of view. This approach might be taken even further by use of a prism-sided curriculum (Singh, in press) where a variety of inversions might be applied to the curriculum. The variety selected might depend on local ethnic demographics.

Signposts to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy - Understandings

However, it is not just with respect to content that Connell argued for inversion, he saw it as also related to method (1989:125). It is here that interpretive ethnography offers some guidance about the sorts of classroom processes that are appropriate across a variety of ethnic groups. Ethnographers like myself have focused on insider meanings and the social processes of classroom life across a wide variety of contexts - year level, cross-cultural classrooms where the teacher and students come from two different ethnic groups (usually remote from cities and large towns), and multi-ethnic classrooms in cities and suburbs (where three or more ethnicities are represented in a classroom). The various ethnicities include Aborigines, Native Americans and Torres Strait Islanders in cross-cultural contexts (see Osborne 1991, for a summary of ethnographies related to the latter two groups) and these groups plus African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic/Chicano/Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Hawaiian Americans and Maoris/South Sea Islanders and Aborigines (see Osborne, in press, for the expanded set of studies).

Space precludes providing the evidence supporting the assertions derived from more than seventy studies in these summaries, but their content is instructive here. Five assertions, some based on unequivocal evidence and others with some contrary evidence, relate to understandings that underpin culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to build from students daily lives (cultures) in such a way as to foster ethnic pride and academic success while critiquing society and using classroom processes the students are comfortable with.

The five understandings are:

Assertion 1. Culturally relevant teachers need not come from the same ethnic group as the students they teach.

Assertion 2. Socio-historico-political realities beyond the school often

constrain much of what happens in classrooms.

Subassertion 2.1 Student agendas during lessons often differ from the teachers and sometimes they are resistant, at others they are parallel.

Assertion 3. Culturally relevant teachers teach content that is linked to

students day to day culture, fosters pride in their ethnic identities, and equips them to function effectively in the wider society.

Assertion 4. Culturally relevant teachers involve parents and families of children from ethnic groups we have marginalised in the schooling of those children.

Assertion 5. It is desirable to include students languages in the school program or at least in classroom interactions (Osborne and Cooper, in progress (a)).

Although these may seem bland and rather self evident, it is instructive to ask why they have not been generally taken on board by teachers and why they have had so little impact on classroom processes, policy formulation/implementation, and success rates of students of students from ethnic groups we have marginalised. My reading of the literature on education across cultures and my own observations in schools is that their impact has generally been minimal notwithstanding the successes of some individuals and schools. These issues need elaboration but fall outside the scope of this paper.

Signposts to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy - Classroom Processes

The classroom process assertions derived from ethnographies of teaching across cultures are:

Assertion 6. Culturally relevant teachers are warm towards, and respectful of students and then academically demanding of them.

Assertion 7. Culturally relevant teachers spell out the cultural assumptions on which their classrooms operate.

Assertion 8. Culturally relevant classroom management tends to involve the following :

Subassertion 8.1 Group work rather than individual competition.

Subassertion 8.2 Indirect rather than direct forms of control.

Subassertion 8.3 Minimising the spotlighting of individuals.

Subassertion 8.4 Particularly in the lower grades incorporating the communication structures of the home.

Subassertion 8.5

Employing unhurried pacing.

Assertion 9. Culturally relevant teachers accept that racism exists in schools and employ strategies to tackle it (Osborne and Cooper, in progress (b)).

These assertions derive from what some teachers already do and presumably others could do. Besides, the assertions are uncomplicated and consistent with what many would see as good teaching

(Ladson-Billings, n.d.). They also indicate that we might not have to educate teachers for a vast array of distinctively different ethnic groups, when it is possible for teachers, according to their specific contexts, to fine tune their teaching by selectively adapting it from a general set of processes. But there are some issues lurking that might derail implementation.

SOME ISSUES OF MICRO REFORM

One issue is simply reading an assertion from one's own (culturally, gender, class-based) unscrutinised subjectivity rather than fully understanding its components and implications in particular ethnic contexts. For example, demandingness must be seen both in the context of what goes before (in terms of warmth and respect) and together with management processes consistent with it. Again, group work might need to be set up, not from an Anglo framework of homogeneity but so as to take account of gender-related taboos, or clan disagreements, at least in some cross-cultural and multi-ethnic contexts. A second issue is: how do we become aware of the cultural assumptions on which we run our respective classrooms?

If cultures by definition (Hall, 1973; Spradley, 1979) contain so much that is out of awareness and ethnographers have to spend so much effort in making the implicit explicit (Spindler, 1992)? This major concern about discovering our own subjectivities is answered elsewhere (Osborne, in progress). A third issue is how to educate pre-service teachers and in-service teachers who want to use a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Some classroom teachers already employ this pedagogy. They should be acknowledged and their successes celebrated. Clearly it is desirable to link preservice teachers with them during practica, as Zeichner (1992) urged. With a prior understanding developed on campus and modelled examples of culturally relevant pedagogy in real classrooms, preservice teachers should be well-prepared to teach across cultures and can fine tune their approaches to specific contexts after graduation. Even so, developing appropriate prior understanding may be difficult and even painful as students unpack institutional racism, colonialist and ethnocentric attitudes, and attempt to reframe their understandings and look to confronting these dilemmas as teachers (Osborne, 1994).

However, for teacher educators, current teachers may pose these challenges and others beyond them. For one thing we know that top-down inservice is largely ineffectual. Hence it seems desirable to engage teachers in a dialogue between equals, as Freire (1972) proposed. However, it is not a straightforward matter to respect teachers' knowledge and empower them on the one hand and have them embrace research findings on the other. For example, the frames and lenses they use to understand students who come from an entirely different cultural background (lived experience) may be inappropriate or even racist. These frames and lenses may have assisted, inadvertently, the perpetuation of dilemmas and also become

habituated in the teachers thinking and behaviour. My suggested resolution of this challenge is to present the assertions (1-9) not as skills that must be used but as signposts teachers might choose to take. Such choices could be encouraged, initially, on the basis of those which they select as being close to their individual conceptions of good teaching. Then, once some signposts show ways to better classroom processes, other originally less contiguous ones might be trialled. Such critical reflection on both research and on personal practice to reframe and transform practice is what Freire (1972: 60) referred to as praxis.

SOME ISSUES OF MACRO REFORM

For another they may lack the knowledge and/or resources to invert a curriculum or introduce bilingual education to meet their local needs. This is a point at which wider social practices become crucial because curriculum materials need money to purchase and time and money to develop. Making money and time available may mean reform beyond the individual classroom or school. Teachers may need to band together with each other not only to research their new classroom processes and work units but also to ensure funding where it is needed. They may also need to band together with parents to ensure that adequate resources are available, not only to begin and sustain consultation but also for curriculum development and the introduction of bilingual programs, for example. Such collective action with each other and with parents is consonant with Aronowitz and Giroux's (1993) notions of new forms of authority to underpin education and new roles for teachers as transformative intellectuals. It could assist in appropriating devolution and investing it with meaning/power beyond mere cost-cutting, too.

While such teacher-parent collective action might also help develop schools organic to their communities (Connell et al, 1982), there are possible tensions in the notion. Groups of parents are not homogenous and some have more power than others in the group, while some may not partici

pate overtly at all. Besides, teachers and parents might hold different positions on best teaching (as Jones, 1991 and Kalantzis et al., 1990, found with parents from some, but not all, ethnic minorities). They could also differ in their perspectives on social justice, attitudes towards various ethnic groups, and rankings of priorities within the school. For some, social justice of all kinds may be a non-issue: they may focus entirely on what they see as best for their own children, irrespective of its effects on others. Others may espouse conservative or liberal notions of social justice although neither position disrupts the existing hegemony (Starr, 1991). Yet others might position themselves, like I do, within the notion of emancipatory social justice, which is about participants in a social context taking reflective, emancipatory political action - it is not about the haves trying to make the lot of the have nots more tolerable or less demanding (p. 23).

As transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 1989) committed to participatory democracy, teachers should be able to engage parents whose views, like the ones above, differ from their own in mutually educative dialogue (Kalantzis et al., 1990) and see it as forging school-community ties rooted in new broad-based forms of authority. These new forms of authority must be based on real dialogue (Freire, 1972) with parents and adapting to their needs in visible ways, while at the same time debating with them issues like social justice. Indeed mutually educative dialogue is but one example of participatory democracy being implemented.

A similar tension arises for teacher educators working with teachers who want to work better with students from ethnic groups we have marginalised but who hold different notions of social justice, or indeed subordinate all forms of social justice to strong commitments to what works or maintaining standards. While both the latter are highly contextualised and far from neutral despite their contrary rhetoric, they automatically advantage some at the expense of others if these contexts are ignored. Negotiating such terrain is tricky, particularly when long term changes are sought, like those derived from culturally relevant pedagogy or Freirean approaches (Shor, 1987a). But negotiated they must be, if in-service is to be effective while social justice and participatory democracy are to have local substance.

Whilst Weiner (1989) found that teachers action research conducted in Britain tended to focus away from issues of social justice (only one of 75 articles published had such a focus), Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) book *Inside/Outside* from the U.S. showed that seven of twenty six teachers included tackled in some way issues of gender, class or ethnicity. Hence, it seems possible to encourage socially just approaches without trying to force teachers to take the issue on board, which is highly likely to be counterproductive. Similarly making cases that social justice and quality are not mutually exclusive and that alone they lead either to inferiority or greater inequality is possible (Shor, 1987b). Not all teachers will embrace these positions, but for those who do, there is hope that a seed of culturally relevant pedagogy as a research-based embodiment of emancipatory justice can be sown and effectively cultivated.

A STRANGLER FIG MODEL OF LOCALLY INITIATED BUT CENTRALLY SUPPORTED EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

This leads to the strangler fig analogy. Birds drop the fig seeds into the crown of a giant tree of the rainforest. One seed germinates and takes hold, slowly sending roots down the side of the host tree to obtain its own nutrients from the rainforest floor. Eventually the roots constrict the host causing it to die and rot. As it falls over, the roots of the strangler fig tree support what remains at an angle to where the original tree stood. New roots find their way directly to the ground, th

is time without the support of the host tree. Thus the new giant, the s

strangler fig, creates a new space for itself by felling its originally healthy host. Without stretching the analogy too far I see ten parallels to my model of reformulating and reforming education.

First the forest does not need to be cleared. A revolution is not needed and this is fortunate because too many have far too much at stake to wipe away what we have and start anew. Second, the original tree seemed too big, completely unassailable. In some ways schooling seems to be unassailable and inequality too big to tackle. Third, the tiny seed ultimately removed the massive tree. So from very small beginnings big changes can occur. Fourth, although it is an entirely different plant the strangler fig is of the same family as that which it replaced. Hence the new school will be easily recognised as a school, although substantively different from the one it replaced. Fifth, the seed could not have grown except at the top of the host where there was plenty of light. In a similar way the new seed needs careful tending to ensure its continued growth. Tending with ideas and external support. Sixth, the strangler fig established a direction and identity of its own. The new school would do the same. Seventh, the analogy is holistic and organic, not reductionist and mechanical, suggesting that life and struggle are key elements of the process. Eighth, the process was long and slow, suggesting there are no quick fixes and that long term commitment is essential. This should help keep things in perspective, so that when change does not occur as quickly as hoped for in a particular direction, despondency can be avoided. Ninth, the strangler fig seed can be seen as social justice (including in this case culturally relevant pedagogy with mutually educative dialogue) and its roots are those who are committed to sustaining this seed. Finally, those roots strongly support the strangler fig because they spread over a broad section of the forest and so might be seen as supporting a wider cross section of society than today's narrow group of power holders: capitalists and professionals, men, Anglos

‡The model I have suggested of praxis oriented reform, initiated and struggled for at the local level and supported via struggle at the macro level, needs a plan of implementation. It will be resisted, probably conceptually and certainly practically, as it establishes new forms of power and authority and in so doing diminishes at least some of the power of current power holders. Nevertheless, there is a research basis to begin the struggle beside marginalised ethnic groups. There are signposts pointing to directions we might start to take. If we do not take them it is most likely that society will become even more divided and, if my earlier analysis is accurate, that will advantage none, in the longer term.

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