

# **Teachers' learning toward the dialogic school - enacting the rhetoric beyond resistance**

**Peter McInerney, Robert Hattam, John Smyth & Mike Lawson**

## Introduction

From what we have argued so far it should be clear that we regard teachers as prominent actors in school reform and, despite their muted voices in much of the official discourse on school change, we believe that it is largely their efforts which determine the success of any moves to transform schooling practices (Zeichner 1993).

Although much has been written about whole school reform, particularly the models of change associated with the Disadvantaged Schools Project and the National Schools Network, the role and nature of teachers' learning in affecting curriculum reform has received considerably less attention. In this paper we want to make this connection much more explicit by focussing more specifically on the struggles and tensions which accompany the endeavours of school communities as they attempt to enact a vision of a dialogic school.

Firstly, we want to present a theoretical account of the phases involved in this process in the form of a model which attempts to highlight the role of teachers' learning in school change.

Secondly, we want to draw on research from the Teachers' Learning Project to show how one school community has been able to enact a vision of social justice based on a recognition of difference and a curriculum response to poverty.

Finally, we want to draw some inferences for teacher development from the results of our research and speculate about the nature and content of resource materials to support teachers' learning.

Throughout this seminar we have referred to the dialogic school as an ideal to be worked for in school reform but before proceeding with the paper it might be useful to restate our understanding of this notion.

We believe that a dialogic school has the following features:

¥ democratic forms of practice which successfully engage parents,  
students and teachers in ongoing dialogues about the curriculum and purposes of schooling

¥ a culture of innovation where the primacy of student learning shapes curriculum planning and pedagogical responses

¥ a concern for social justice as expressed in ongoing efforts to reduce inequalities in education, a capacity to embrace and celebrate cultural diversity and a willingness to critique and work towards the removal of unjust practices in society

¥ a discourse which emphasises critical literacies rather than just

functional literacies as a means of engaging students in purposeful  
reflection about the socially constructed nature of knowledge, and

¥ a culture of learning where forums and processes for critical

reflection are embedded in the fabric of school routines and practices.

Such a community, we believe, has the potential to function as a genuine "public sphere" where citizens can come together to deliberate about their common affairs, to contest prevailing discourses and construct alternative visions of society (Fraser 1994: 78). At this point it might be asserted that the emancipatory vision contained in the concept of the dialogic school represents some fanciful ideal which is well beyond the reach of school communities. In a current political climate marked by an emphasis on marketisation and commodification of education, a 'back to basics' view of learning, and a pre-occupation with particular forms of educational accountability and standardised testing (Reid 1997: 8), it appears that teachers work is increasingly being construed as a technical enterprise directed towards the goals of a narrow, vocationally oriented education. In some quarters teachers are being positioned as implementers of centrally determined curriculum agendas rather than autonomous, transformative agents. While we don't want to down play the formidable nature of the barriers to school-based reform we believe that our research shows how some teachers and school communities are working against this prevailing discourse to sustain a broader view of teaching as a moral activity where concerns for

educational inequality and social justice underpin teachers' work and learning. These schools, it seems, have been able to successfully engage with parents, students and public institutions to:

¥ generate discourses which engage people in changing schools from

"within" as distinct from "without" and open up "transformative possibilities" on how schools and society might be changed for the better (Goodman 1995)

¥ open up the dialogic spaces for learning within the community

¥ foster a culture of dialogue around teaching and learning, and

¥ sustain a commitment to teaching and schooling as a moral and political activity.

Teachers' learning and school reform - a theoretical model

What enables schools to step out of the straight jacket of conformity and hegemonic practices and begin to move towards more transformative and civil democratic communities? We believe that a useful way of conceptualising the dynamic and problematic nature of this process is contained in Diagram 1 which attempts to highlight the central importance of teachers' learning in the trajectory towards the dialogic school.

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Diagram 1 Teachers' Learning and the Dialogic School: Enacting the  
vision beyond rhetoric

From the outset we want to suggest that a circular rather than a linear model of change best represents the dynamic and problematic nature of schooling where new educational agendas and changing economic and social circumstances require school to constantly revisit the underlying school vision and re-evaluate their curriculum priorities. What follows is an outline of the main features of this model and an explanation of the ways in which teachers' learning facilitates the development of a dialogic school.

Developing a vision

We believe that vibrant schools take seriously the need to have a courageous vision or statement of purpose that is broadly understood and shared by the community, and which acts as a guide to school planning processes and curriculum development. Depending on the situated nature of the school and its curriculum focus this vision may be framed around notions such as middle schooling, social justice, the arts, gender equity or technology. If the vision is to command broad support it is clear that it must be developed in conjunction with

teachers, parents, students and respond to the significant social/cultural/economic issues arising from the community. What seems particularly important here is the sense of community ownership of the vision and the belief in the transformative possibilities of the school itself. Obviously the process of developing the vision also entails a commitment of resources, time to debate educational issues, a willingness to mine ideas from other sources and attention to the structures to support the reform process.

### Enacting the vision

It is possible for visions to come 'unstuck' unless schools develop a set of organisational structures, practices and discourses to support a culture of innovation necessary to facilitate curriculum reform. This will necessarily involve a range of learning for teachers which might include how to work in teams, teach with new technology, negotiate the curriculum, relate to parents, respond to poverty and so on depending on the priorities emerging from the school vision. An important element in this process involves advancing a distributive view of leadership where those with knowledge and curriculum expertise have an opportunity to exercise their authority in the school setting. Although it is possible that teachers can draw on the intellectual resources of their colleagues to bring about curriculum change, schools also need to look at ways of bringing new ideas into their midst. In effect school communities need to develop the skills to appropriate knowledge and financial resources from external sources, such as state and federally funded curriculum projects and teacher support groups.

## Working through oppositions and tensions

Of course schooling practices are usually contested within and outside the classroom - by students, other teachers and parents with alternative view about what constitutes good teaching and learning.

Resistance is likely to come in a number of forms including:

¥ Opposition from teachers themselves concerned about intensification of

their work and increasing societal expectations of their roles. There are teachers who believe that they have neither the time nor the energy for critical reflection or involvement in broader school reform issues. In these circumstances some teachers may be willing to trade of professional autonomy and control over their work for reductions in their workloads.

¥ Student resistance which in some instances might be framed as a battle

for the control of the learning environment where teachers and students engage in struggles over the forms of knowledge which are to be legitimated in the curriculum.

¥ Parental opposition which often surfaces in schools which are

attempting to re-configure the whole notion of what constitutes a relevant and worthwhile education for young people. Schools trying to advance middle schooling practices, for example, have to contend with entrenched beliefs about the intrinsic value of horizontal grouping and subject disciplines as opposed to vertical class groups and an

integrated curriculum.

¥ Other forms of resistance may stem from innovative practices which challenge existing educational bureaucracies, industrial agreements or forms of curriculum delivery.

Hence, attempts to sustain a particular school vision are usually acted out in an environment characterised by competing view points, conflicting rights and oppositional elements which need to be acknowledged and confronted as an integral part of the school reform process.

#### Strategic action

We argue that a school's capacity to develop and sustain a coherent educational vision is dependent upon an ongoing engagement with the community so that parents, teachers and students are continually involved in dialogues about student learning, curriculum development and policy making. Working through opposition also involves implementing organisational and educative practices which create the space and opportunities for teachers and parents to develop shared understandings about teaching practices and student learning. Schools need to engage in creative processes to facilitate teachers' learning through:

¥ systematic planning of training and development programs and forums within the school calendar to provide time for teachers and school support staff to reflect on their teaching practices

¥ allocation of resources in ways which maximise support for students  
and create opportunities for staff to participate in team teaching  
practices and the preparation of special programs.

What we have found to be crucial if schools are to move towards the  
dialogic school is the capability to make sense of the contestations  
and then to implement strategic action to advance the vision in away  
which maintains community support.

The model in action - The Gums School

What does this process look like in real life? We want to illustrate  
the various elements of the model with an example from our field  
research in South Australia. The site in question, which we shall refer  
to as The Gums School, is a large R- 7 school with a culturally diverse  
community in which more than two thirds of the students are from  
non-English speaking backgrounds. Regionally the district is  
characterised by relatively high levels of unemployment and areas of  
poverty and presently more than 50% of children qualify for government  
financial support as School Card Holders.

The educational vision - keeping social justice on the agenda

It is not easy to sustain a commitment to social justice in a political

environment dominated by economic rationalist thinking. Indeed one could argue that in recent times the rhetoric of social justice seems to have been all but abandoned in national debates about schooling and educational achievement in Australian society. In a discourse which seems to privilege notion of parental choice, quality assurance and outcomes-based education social justice seems to have been rendered politically incorrect. Luke (1997: 17) draws our attention to the damaging consequences for many marginalised communities when social justice is being re-named 'access', poverty responses have collapsed to literacy programs, gender equity issues are being framed in terms of concerns for boys, and cultural diversity is once again being described in terms of intellectual, linguistic and family deficits . Yet as Lingard (1994) and Levin (1995) schools require stronger and more focussed responses to poverty and other forms of oppression if educational inequalities are to be reduced in Australian society.

At The Gums School such issues are taken seriously and social justice has remained an ongoing feature of the School Development Plan in spite of cut-backs to the Federally funded Disadvantaged Schools Project. As we began to talk to teachers and students at the school it became clear to us that this commitment extended beyond rhetoric, that social justice was alive and flourishing in the school community, and that learning how to develop appropriate responses to the needs of children in poverty and/or those from culturally diverse backgrounds were high priorities for teachers' learning. What we saw drove home Connell's salutary reminder that social justice is more than a distributive

question - it goes to the heart of the curriculum itself (Connell 1992:136). As Connell points out the question of 'how much' in education cannot be separated from 'what' - in other words there is an inescapable link between distribution and content, pedagogical processes and forms of assessment. We also encountered a response to social justice which sought to engage with the broader causes of oppression encompassed in Young's notion of the 'politics difference' (Young 1990) - a response which attempted to address issues of gender, cultural difference and racism within the curriculum.

Enacting a social justice vision - establishing structures, practices and discourses

In the model described earlier we spoke of the significance of school structures, processes and community dialogue in enacting a school vision. What we saw at The Gums is as good an example as we have seen of a school planning process which engages all parents, teachers and students in decisions about curriculum priorities. We think that it merits some elaboration in this paper.

Curriculum review occurs bi-annually at The Gums School. On the most recent occasion children were engaged in the process through several forums. Meetings were held with the student council, the Aboriginal student group and students from non English-speaking backgrounds to discuss the issues related to quality of education in the 8 required areas of study identified in the Department for Education and

Children's Services policy guidelines, 'Educating for the 21st Century'. Students in small groups of mixed age and gender were also invited to contribute to the review in class settings. They were given some information about their entitlement to a quality education and were asked to identify areas in the curriculum where they thought they were getting good outcomes and areas which they thought needed to be improved in the school.

Students were required to justify their decisions and they used a preferential voting system to decide their priorities. Every child had 6 green dots to allocate in a way that best reflected the strength of their feelings. In the final analysis students strongly voted for the Arts (visual, performing) followed by Aboriginal Education. 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 2 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 Education.

This information was taken back to the staff for their consideration of the varying priorities of teachers, parents and students. They talked about the data in small groups and then voted on the direction of the school and the professional development of the staff for the next 4 years. When it came to the final voting a lot of staff changed their vote and supported students in their choice of the Arts. The student presentation had made a big impact on many teachers. After staff deliberation agreement was reached that Literacy and the Arts would form the major priorities. Aboriginal Education was added because of the lobbying from Aboriginal parents and Science will be added in 1998.

It is easy to pay lip service to community consultation in curriculum reform but we think that this example illustrates the powerful ways in which schools can develop shared educational visions through democratic and educative planning processes.

For teachers at The Gums School successful teaching hinges on the applying of knowledge about the educational issues associated with poverty and the cultural backgrounds of students. A significant proportion of Disadvantaged Schools Project funds are directed towards programs which enhance teacher's learning in areas directly related to social justice and schooling - for example TRT funding to release teachers for workshops on poverty, multiculturalism and Aboriginal education. At the classroom level teachers have developed practices which attempt to respond to poverty, gender and cultural differences by:

- ¥ sustaining a success oriented learning environment where students play
  - a much more active role in making decisions about the curriculum, such
  - as negotiating the criteria for success in learning activities
  
- ¥ emphasising critical literacy approaches which reposition students as
  - researchers of language, problematise classroom and public texts, and
  - help to foster respect for cultural differences
  
- ¥ celebrating and valuing the multi-cultural heritage and traditions of
  - the Australian community through festivals, musicals and community
  - functions
  
- ¥ explicit teaching approaches and the use of data to assess
  - improvements in-student learning for specific groups of students.

Working through resistance - engaging with the school community

These changes are not taking place without elements of opposition from within and outside the school community. In fact there have been some 'feisty' debates about issues ranging from reporting and assessment practices and curriculum priorities to the schools participation in the Basic Skills Test - a state government initiative which ties funding for literacy programs to results in literacy and numeracy testing programs of students in Years 3 and 5.

Several aspects of the school's capacity to work through these elements

of resistance stand out. Firstly, the school has not closed down the public spaces where conflicting views about the school's curriculum directions can be debated and considered in the light of new ideas. Rather, the school has taken seriously the notion of keeping dialogues open and allowing for the continued exploration of major curriculum issues. The following remarks from a teacher at the school captures the nature of this process rather well.

We have had some tricky issues like the teacher a few years ago who wanted us to adopt an A B C D E F mode of reporting because it was a less time consuming process for teachers. We could have made an attempt to silence him or to avoid taking the issue to the whole staff group . . . We didn't do it that way . . . [Rather] we asked, what kind of information do kids need to be able to improve their learning . . . In the end [when it went for a vote] he didn't vote for his own idea . . .

As the narrator of this story went on to say, often quite productive outcomes can emerge out of situations where authenticity is tested to the extreme:

At the moment we are sticking with writing descriptive reports . . . . doing portfolios and writing stuff on work samples, but I don't reckon that's the end of that conversation either . . . Even though [the above teachers' solution] was a bit scary, the conversation from that is still going on and it lead to lots of debate.

Secondly, the school has strategies and processes which actively engage members of the school community in curriculum change so that they develop their own knowledge and understanding of new ideas and approaches to learning. A spectacular example of this took place when the school embarked on the painting of a set of murals to enhance the aesthetic and educational environment of the grounds and buildings as part of the arts curriculum focus. A teacher who described himself as a 'failed artist' managed to secure 20 TRT days to release teachers for a series of workshops designed to teach them the necessary skills to get the project up and running. Parents also participated in these workshops and joined forces with the students to make the murals a truly community project.

In short the school has managed to win the support of parents and students to ensure a sense of community ownership of the school's vision that goes a long way to counteracting the forms of opposition to curriculum reform encountered in less democratic and less civic-minded communities.

Inferences about teachers' learning and school reform

A major aim of the Teachers' Learning Project is to trial and develop resource materials that might enhance teachers' learning in schools.

What this model suggests is that teachers' learning and school reform are intimately connected and that enhancing teachers' learning is about

shifting the school culture towards the critical collaborative school.

If this is the case then, materials that might enhance teachers learning need to contribute to a cultural reformation of schools. The materials need to attend to the sorts of oppositions that we have identified in the paper - and hence advance some of the more significant strategic actions outlined in the case study.

Although we are still engaged in the drafting of case studies and ongoing theorising about the nature of teachers' learning we have begun to speculate about the contents of the materials to support teachers' learning. We want to canvas the following examples of modules or topics which we regard as potentially useful in supporting schools and teachers engaged in 'grass roots' reform.

School development planning: towards the dialogic school

A module which explores the notion of whole school change with these features: reforming the mainstream curriculum to improve the learning outcomes of all students; involving parents and students in curriculum decision making; integrating the change process in existing school structures; and, redirecting resources to assist in the change process.

Critical reflection on classroom practice

Central to enhancing teacher learning is being able to investigate rigorously what's happening in classrooms - investigations that are managed by teachers, involving their peers and being able to situate themselves within a wider milieu.

### Making sense of what students are learning

This module proposes an approach to assessment that also involves evaluation of the curriculum. What are students learning also needs to be understood in terms of what opportunities are they given to learn?

### Enhancing student voice in schools

Students voices are often silent in curriculum change. We suggest that there is an urgent need to explore the ways in which students can be involved in school planning, decision making, negotiating the curriculum, school evaluation and doing research.

### Investigating the nature of the school community

Curriculum relevance is about minimising 'interactive trouble' - of being able to make curriculum that is sensitive to cultural difference and to the social and geographical nature of the community. Dialogue with the community is essential. if teachers are able to develop appropriate curriculum responses to the school context.

### Who gets to be a leader around here?

Curriculum leadership is often cited as a panacea for reforming schools. But an important question to be pursued is: "how is leadership understood and it might be reformulated so that the learning resources of everyone in the school are utilised"?

### Moving to a middle school approach

Middle schooling is about developing pedagogy that: emphasises the student-teacher relationship; engages students in negotiating the curriculum; involves constructing curriculum that is sensitive to the social and cultural milieu impacting on the construction of student identity encourages collaboration between teachers, and students, in the learning experience; and, favours success-oriented assessment

### Doing critical cultural studies in schools

We propose that a critical cultural studies that provides a way of looking at the cultural complexity of daily life and the diversity of cultural artefacts and texts which inform, limit and enable understandings and actions of people as independent and social actors within Australian society.

### Conclusions

In this paper we have placed a great deal of faith in the capacity of schools and teachers to enact reforms which will engage students in a socially relevant and worthwhile curriculum as part of a resolve to ensure more socially just outcomes in schooling. We have taken the position that schools are the best sites for making decisions about the substantive issues involving the curriculum and that efforts to enhance teachers' learning are central to any endeavours to improve the learning for students. In this context we believe that the model of

change proposed in the paper provides some useful concepts to begin to understand how teachers' learning might be enhanced to enact a vision of a dialogic school that moves beyond rhetoric and resistance to reality.

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