

## **AARE Conference Paper: Sydney; NSW**

**Monday December 4th 2000**

### **School reform for social justice: Reflections from a critical ethnographic study of Wattle Plains School.**

#### **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 in an age marked by the emergence of new social movements and an ascendancy of neo-liberal governance operating under the banner of economic rationality it is pertinent to ask: what are the major discourses informing school-based responses to social justice today? what does it mean to teach in socially just ways in the context of a devolving school system and, are there socially-just alternatives to marketised versions of self-managing schools?

This paper reports on a recent critical ethnographic study of Wattle Plains School—a community that is railing against a 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). In an earlier AARE/NZARE Conference Paper (McInerney, 1999), I gave a tentative reading of the school reform for social justice at the school and highlighted some of the dilemmas confronting those who dare to 'swim against the tide' (Freire, 1985). In this paper I want to expand on the cultural, structural and pedagogical features of school reform at Wattle Plains before addressing some broader concerns for those engaged in grassroots reform. But before doing so I want to consider some of the emerging issues for those involved in research into educational inequalities and examine the political context of the study.

#### **What are the social justice issues today?**

There are several reasons why research into social justice and schooling must remain an ongoing priority. Firstly, 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; namely, 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, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest 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 casualisation of the labour force in the late twentieth century (Fincher & Nieuwenhuysen, 1998; Raskall, 1996). But injustices are not confined to material inequalities. At the close of the century 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 amongst 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 better understand their impact on schools, on teachers' work and on the educational experiences of students. In these new circumstances we need to ask: are the old remedies to social injustices still relevant? what are the limits to local solutions to educational disadvantage? how might we conceive of new approaches which take account of the global nature of the problem? The current reform agenda with its emphasis on school-based management has also led to a new set of arrangements for addressing 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 the locus for action to enact curriculum that is responsive to the community, to support students in poverty and to take responsibility 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 framed around a new language of recognition and difference arising from global (and, in some instances, local) social movements which have tended to undermine the older redistribution notion of social justice (Fraser, 1997; Young, 1991). I believe that we need to know more about the ways in which schools can work towards the alleviation of cultural injustices, for example, those confronting gay and lesbian people, students with disabilities, ethnic minorities and indigenous Australians. Most importantly, we need to get inside schools to get an understanding of the possibilities and dilemmas associated with such a task from those most closely connected to schools-teachers themselves. Hence the importance of ethnographic studies.

### **The political context: 'Gone are the days of social justice'**

One of the key principles of school-based (grassroots reform) is that a school community should have the power to identify and implement curricula and organisational arrangements to improve learning for its students. But as Goodman, Baron and Myers (1999b) point out school autonomy is always a matter of degree since individual schools operate within a context of external powers whose goals and directions are shaped by ideological factors of national and global dimensions. The day-to-day work of teachers does not occur in isolation from wider economic, social and cultural movements, nor is it immune from the political agendas of State and Federal Governments.

From time to time we are reminded of the devastating impact of these agendas on local communities. I offer the following example from South Australia. Without community consultation and little advance warning the Minister of Education announced the closure of an R-12 multi-ethnic community school in metropolitan Adelaide. What made this school so culturally significant was its avowed commitment to social justice, as reflected in an After Hour Learning Support Centre, special facilities for students with disabilities, extensive language programs to support recently arrived migrants and well established networks of support with community welfare groups. The last school magazine was an opportunity for staff and students to reflect on what was and what might have been. One of the most touching accounts of the personal trauma engendered by the school closure came from a student who described her feelings thus:

On the day when the high ranking officer announced the school closure, I felt shocked. It was like an earthquake in South Australia. Today the school year is drawing towards the end. I have many good memories of this school. Good friends,

good teachers, healthy environments. I look forward to the future with doubt. To conclude I can say, [my school] is the glory of the past.

(Year 11 ESL student)

A sense of powerlessness and sadness pervades these words. The shock and disbelief of the closure; an affection for the school and feelings of uncertainty are all woven into a narrative that could well be an epitaph for the school. Under a heading, *Gone are the days of social justice*, a teacher reflected on the demise of social justice in a similarly evocative manner.

For many years the ideas of being fair and inclusive have been the mainstream of the Australian educational system. At school the issues for most of us are what the teachers can do to increase classroom engagement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and how people can participate in the struggle to overcome barriers of self-esteem and social class. The government has decided to knock down the building of school achievements instead of developing further social justice strategies. The spirit of social justice has vanished into thin air. In the current socio-economic environment two strata of education are running in parallel; one for the privileged and the other for the disadvantaged. The here and now issue for all of us is how to deal with such totally strange ideologies in the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty.

(Teacher)

Of course school closures have always been part of the educational landscape but these poignant words point to a much harsher reality of a 'deepening divide' in Australian education (Gilbert, 2000) as a consequence of the current neo-liberal reform agenda which has written over social justice with a language of 'choice' and 'diversity'. In a touch of irony, at least one of these former public school sites in South Australia has since been occupied by a newly formed independent school, funded under the Commonwealth New School arrangements. It has a school population less than half that of the school that was closed down.

To elaborate a little on the major political and economic context of the study, what we are now witnessing 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 illustrated in the demise of the National Schools Network (NSN) and the National Professional Development Program (NPDP), and the reframing of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) under the rubric of the Commonwealth Literacy and Numeracy Programs (McInerney, Hattam, Lawson & Smyth, 2000). As state bureaucracies have been reduced to 'administrative husks' (Seddon, 1995) and responsibility for teachers' learning has been 'handballed' to schools there has been a closing down of spaces for debates in educational bureaucracies. To a large extent teachers have been sidelined from policy-making (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998) and consigned to the role of technicians-mere implementers of mandated curriculum.

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 notion of 'educational disadvantage' is increasingly seen in terms of

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) has led to a widening gap in the provision of educational services and outcomes across public schools. At a federal level the debate about poverty and schooling has collapsed to literacy amidst a fetish for standardised testing and outcomes-based education. Finally, the notion of 'putting education to work' has resulted in a convergence of vocational and general education (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998).

These changes are occurring at a time of increasing intensification and rising community expectations of teachers' work. In recent years public schools in South Australia have had to take on board National Statements and Profiles, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs, DECStech 2001 (the department's Information Technology plan), Foundation Areas of Learning for 0-3 year old students, Commonwealth literacy and numeracy programs and a raft of policies including the Gender Equity Framework and the Disability Discrimination Act. Add to this moves towards local school management, under the label, Partnerships 21, and the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA) and you have what many teachers regard as chronic work overload.

### **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, especially in the context of globalising influences on education policy. 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, p. 57) reminds us: '[e]ducational reforms eventually have to work through teachers, and worthwhile reforms have to work with them' 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.

To invoke the theme of this conference, sustaining a spirit of optimism does seem to be a necessary pre-condition for creating a language of possibility for school reform. From my observations there are school communities which still continue to exhibit the progressive edge of educational practices that came to be associated with public schooling in South Australia during the 1970s and 1980s. Most importantly there still exists a core group of teachers and principals whose involvement in the Disadvantaged Schools Program, 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. Issues of equity and social justice still occupy a prominent place on the agenda of these schools in spite of the financial constraints and lack of systemic support. Despite these impediments there are schools which have been willing to develop curriculum that is responsive to concerns and aspirations of local communities—schools that take account of poverty and the educational needs of Aboriginal students as well as those from non-English speaking backgrounds. Wattle Plains is one of these schools.

### **Wattle Plains School**

Wattle Plains is a large culturally diverse school community serving a low socio-economic district on the fringe of the Adelaide metropolitan area. More than two thirds of the students come from a non-English speaking background and presently about 50 per cent of parents qualify for government financial support as School Card holders. 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.

### **Methodology: a critical ethnographic approach**

When I commenced my research at the school I was aware of its longstanding involvement in the now defunct Disadvantaged Schools Program and I was particularly interested in observing how teachers' understandings of social justice and educational disadvantage were being translated into practice at the whole school and classroom level. From the outset my aim was to anchor the text in the world of lived experiences (Denzin, 1997) by generating rich descriptions of teachers' interpretations of socially just schooling. This approach involved an extensive phase of participant observation and ongoing dialogues with teachers in the form of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with a group of about ten informants. Throughout the study I kept a reflective journal and supplemented my observations with photographic records, curriculum documents and field notes.

However, beyond the interpretive nature of the research, I also endeavoured to maintain a socially critical focus by attempting to situate participants' accounts within a larger historical, political, economic and symbolic context and seeking to uncover the social relationships which determine the actions of the actors (Angus, 1986). In other words, I attempted to ground the study in a critical appraisal of teachers' work and the reform agenda outlined earlier in this paper. Several questions guided my study:

- How do schools like Wattle Plains define their commitment to social justice?
- What is it like to 'teach against the grain' in these schools?
- How does the school sustain a culture of social justice?
- What are the struggles and tensions associated with this commitment?

The research involved three rounds of 'purposeful conversations' (Burgess, 1988) with individuals and groups of teachers during which the topics of the discussion moved from relational issues to a focus on the local school and its curriculum response to social justice and ultimately to the ways in which teachers' work is mediated by economic, political and cultural influences external to the school. At our last formal gathering my key informants reflected on the question: what does it mean to teach in socially just ways?-reflections that have subsequently been incorporated into the study.

What did the research reveal about the level of commitment to social justice at Wattle Plains? How did teachers understand the notion of socially just schooling? I want to briefly explore these questions before looking at the major features of the whole school reform agenda for social justice.

### **A social justice headset-'you can't remain neutral'**

Although my informants expressed their understandings of social justice in different ways they shared a common resolve that one could not be a successful teacher at Wattle Plains without acquiring a social justice headset. They acknowledged that successful learning for many of their students demanded interventionist strategies in order to ameliorate educational inequalities arising from poverty, disability, gender and the cultural/linguistic backgrounds of students. To a large degree, they believed that it was possible to counteract deficit views of children and their families, to sustain a culture of reform around social justice and to act in transformative ways that gave students more power over their lives. Rather

than being paralysed by the magnitude of the task, or submitting to the prophets of doom, they clung tenaciously and optimistically to the belief that they could (and were) able to make a real difference for students. Most importantly, they saw this task as a curriculum issue and not something that could be tinkered with around the margins. For these teachers, sharing power with students and responding to cultural diversity meant that they had to democratise their classrooms, promote student voices and develop curriculum in conjunction with students.

These teachers also had an understanding of the political nature of their work, a point emphasised by Olivia :

(The school) can't be a neutral place in the sense of what's happening in society . . . for example, the National Action stuff that happened last year around near the high school. Our response to that was to form an antiracism working party and to in-service all the children in anti-racism and to do harassment workshops so that children were empowered to have a voice to counter that . . . We are actually saying every child at our school has the right to feel safe and to get an education and they shouldn't be harassed by that so we're going to make sure that the children in our school know that . . . (W)e're not scared to take a stand for the rights of children and families of the school.

Olivia clearly understood that the schools have 'an organic relationship with the community at large' (Macedo, 1994, p. 140); that what happens in classrooms is profoundly influenced by what the students brought from society. However, she also believed that this was a two-way relationship and that the school could play an important role in helping to transform community attitudes by enacting socially just curriculum, for example through antiracist programs.

Most of my informants acknowledged that their understandings of social inequalities and educational disadvantage were acquired as a consequence of teaching in Priority Project schools and an active participation in the Disadvantaged Schools Program. There was a sense of agency about many of the teachers at Wattle Plains—a belief that they could actually make a difference for students. Sally summed this up 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 within society or . . . do you want to exclude the people that fit your notion of the world?

The notion of power was a recurring theme in teachers' descriptions of educational inequalities and it was apparent that they were drawn extensively on programs developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (1990). Sally suggested that the prevalence of poverty together with cultural/linguistic factors helped to create 'at risk' groups of students who were in grave danger of not experiencing success in schooling. She asserted that addressing the different outcomes for these 'at risk' groups should be the starting point for developing a social justice policy, a fundamental goal of which should involve an extension of democratic practices within the school. Similarly for Sophie, the notion of power seemed to be paramount in any discussions about social injustices.

When we are looking at social justice we are saying we want children at Wattle Plains to have access to power and we want them to be educated about power.

These remarks suggest a commitment to social justice and some shared understandings about the issues of power in tackling educational inequalities. But it is difficult to see how social justice can be sustained as a school priority unless it occupies a central plank in school planning processes and is enacted with, and through, the whole school community. Undoubtedly, this has been the experience of those involved in school reform projects such as the Disadvantaged Schools Program and the National Schools Network, both of which emphasised the need to develop curriculum in response to educational inequalities at the whole school level, and in a democratic and participatory manner to take account of the experiences and concerns of the community (Connell, White & Johnstone, 1992). What we have learnt from these programs is that 'restructuring', 'reculturing' and 'pedagogical change' are all necessary and interrelated aspects of whole school reform directed towards improving the educational outcomes for 'disadvantaged' students (Harradine, 1996; Ladwig, Currie & Chadbourne, 1994).

### **Sustaining a culture of reform for social justice**

This view of school reform was very much in evidence at Wattle Plains where social justice remained high on the school's agenda in spite of cut-backs to federally funded projects and the demise of the State education system's Social Justice Action Plan. In what follows I want to elaborate on the structural, cultural and pedagogical features of this culture of reform for social justice.

### **Structures to support socially just curriculum**

At Wattle Plains, many of the structures and organisational reforms supported a whole school focus on social justice and provided teachers with the resources to develop curriculum in response to poverty and other inequalities. Foremost amongst 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. Secondly, the school had established procedures to ensure that all curriculum initiatives took account of the impact of poverty and other social injustices on 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 committee was represented on each of the school committees to ensure that action plans and budgetary decisions took account of educational disadvantage, although this is now considered a core task of all groups.

Thirdly, the school made use of Priority Project grants (now incorporated under the Commonwealth Literacy Project) to support teachers' professional development in areas directly linked to social justice and schooling. In the past this included TRT funds to release teachers for workshops in ESL, literacy, the arts and Aboriginal education. Some funds were used to purchase curriculum resources and a proportion was used to subsidise the costs of excursions and cultural activities. Fourthly, 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 literacy, the arts, science and technology worked across the school (in conjunction with curriculum committees) to implement change. As priorities changed so did the leadership roles within the school. Finally, training and development programs articulated with curriculum directions and objectives outlined in the school's statement of purpose. Scheduled school closure days provided extended time for whole school professional development whilst Temporary Relief Teacher (TRT) funding enabled individuals and groups of teachers to plan teaching programs.

Although these structures helped to establish collaborative arrangements and create spaces for teachers' professional development it was the school culture which helped to promote an ethos of social justice in the daily life of the school.

### **A culture of reform for social justice**

In an educational setting, it is manifestly absurd to speak of the existence of a single 'school culture' embodying the shared meanings and collective aspirations of the entire community. Rather, it is more appropriate to acknowledge the existence of multiple voices and a range of cultures (and subcultures) which reflect a diversity of views and unequal power arrangements. However, as Angus (1996) explains, the 'organizational culture' of a school is frequently depicted as a single entity capable of being manipulated by the school leadership to forge a particular educational vision. Although principals are invested with considerable authority, such a reading ignores the range of cultural influences within the school over which a principal has little or no control, as well as the broader political and economic factors operating from outside. Hence, making meaning, as Angus suggests, is a profoundly social act which requires 'agency, energy and struggle' (p. 973). Ultimately, meaning is made against other meanings through a process of negotiation between the various groups and interests that make up a school community and society at large. In the current political climate school communities are subject to a pervasive discourse of managerialism and marketisation of education—a discourse which I believe is increasingly working to undermine a culture of reform around social justice.

Recognising the limits to the notion of a single 'school culture' at Wattle Plains, I want to point to the presence of a prevailing school culture which has helped to sustain an ongoing commitment to social justice—such a commitment is reflected in the notion of a dialogic school, a culture of debate about teaching and learning and the existence of educative and distributive forms of leadership.

### ***A dialogic school***

The notion a 'dialogic school' is quite a powerful way of describing a community, such as Wattle Plains which had developed its own internally persuasive discourse (Goodman, 1994) about what is pedagogically sound and socially just. Instead of submitting to authoritative discourses (Bakhtin, 1981) with closed or firmly fixed views of what constitutes 'good' teaching and learning, teachers at Wattle Plains operated within a culture which kept open the possibility of working towards alternative and potentially more transformative pedagogies.

Rather than allowing those at a distance to drive the school's agenda, curriculum decisions were generally made by participants on the basis of rational thinking, rather than some knee jerk reaction. Invariably the question that was asked when a new idea presented itself was: how might this improve students' learning? Hence, the school was quite willing to participate in departmental projects, especially when these were accompanied by resources that might promote teachers' learning and enhance their own school reform agenda. Commenting on the school's attitude towards departmental policies Sally stated:

We tend not to get emotional and resist system requirements. We let system requirements try and improve what we do . . . we don't just chop and change because of the system requirements because no decent learning happens at all. We ask 'are they useful, and how can they enhance what we are choosing to do?'

There seemed to be a strong belief that any changes in policy and practice at Wattle Plains should be preceded by informed discussion and research. 'People here are not afraid of

data,' explained Margaret when she spoke of the extensive use of community surveys in evaluating curriculum initiatives, documenting student achievements and generating ideas to guide curriculum reform. Although the school had not rejected external accountability measures, such as the Basic Skills Test, it did have its own view about the kind of research necessary to satisfy 'quality assurance', as evidenced in the school's literacy audit. According to Sally:

. . . when we did our literacy audit . . . we actually looked at the attainment, for instance, of our Aboriginal students to see how their attainment and achievement compared with the rest of the children. We looked at things like behaviour management issues; we looked at the time out room in terms of School Card holders, whether they were over-represented, and I know that going back to 1994 they were over-represented and that led to us rethinking how, why we operate it. In classrooms it led to us having a bigger emphasis on democratic decision making for students and staff, and a bigger emphasis on collaborative learning in terms of the way of engaging children with the curriculum.

Developing audits and making use of data to measure improvements in student learning for specific groups of children was standard practice—a practice that reflected a social justice ethos in planning processes. As a consequence, teachers were able to access a great deal of information about student attainment in literacy, numeracy, technology, the arts and other curriculum areas—information that gave them a better understanding of the achievement and participation rates of individual students and particular cohorts of the school population, including girls, Aboriginal students, School Card holders and students from a non-English speaking background.

In sustaining their own research culture and rejecting the prescriptive nature of many external school reform measures, teachers at Wattle Plains recognised that their work involved more than the implementation of someone else's agenda. Instead, teaching was viewed by many as an intellectual activity (Giroux, 1988) that had a moral and political dimension. A key feature of this involved sustaining a culture of debate about teaching and learning.

#### *Sustaining a debate about teaching and learning*

The idea that what constitutes good teaching and learning is contestable and does not nestle easily with neo-liberal policy makers intent on implementing centrally produced educational goals in accordance with economic rationalist policies. In circumstances where teachers' work has become increasingly intensified and proletarianised, there is a possibility that teachers might be tempted to seek refuge in 'teacher-proof' packages or a comfort zone of inaction when it comes to debating curriculum matters. In other words, to focus on individual goals and to get on with the job of classroom teaching whilst leaving others to deal with policy matters might be seen as a preferred means of coping with increasing workloads and societal expectations of teachers.

From my observations this approach did not prevail at Wattle Plains. On the contrary, staff were involved in a great deal of rigorous, school-based and teacher-initiated professional development that was highly focused on student learning and teaching practices. Teachers' learning of educational 'disadvantage' was not confined to one-off induction programs; rather, it involved an ongoing dialogue that occurred on a regular basis through the collegiate teams, curriculum committees and a leadership group, all of which served as conduits for the professional development of teachers and school-service officers (SSOs). Having a space for teachers to learn about matters of social justice sent out a powerful message about what this school valued.

The kinds of dialogues taking place in these forums were not devoid of spark or fire and on many occasions debates were deliberately structured into the training and development sessions. Let me refer to my journal for an abridged summary of a structured controversy which I witnessed in a collegiate team meeting.

The literacy coordinator wrote the topic for debate on the whiteboard: *It's no use having a critical literacy approach to literacy if the students don't have the basics*. Teachers were invited to divide into two groups and debated the merits of the cases in a lively manner for 30 minutes before coming together in an effort to reach consensus on the issue. It was clear to me that these teachers were very comfortable with these kinds of dialogues and were not afraid to express alternative views in the relative safety of smaller groups. It also struck me that teachers were not only finding out about critical approaches to literacy but were practising collaborative learning strategies that they could use in their own classes.

(P. McInerney, Field Notes, 1997)

From my perspective, the pedagogy of this session looked fundamentally different from that associated with many conventional training and development workshops where outside 'experts' transmit mandated policies to school groups. Not only did teachers and school service-officers have the opportunity to draw on the intellectual resources of their colleagues but they also had the space to engage in sustained reflection and debate on their teaching practices. What I saw was indicative of a school culture which encouraged teachers to confront and challenge educational practices without losing sight of the relationship side of teaching—a point made by Sophie when she suggested:

Staff meeting structures have allowed people to practise and learn the skills of debating while not losing the relationship side of things . . . if we disagree we do that publicly too.

Margaret too argued that the school had worked to create an environment in which public disagreement was permissible. She claimed:

It is part of the culture of this school to have really feisty debates about educational issues. People feel safe to do that because the culture we're trying to develop in this place is about learning rather than protecting your back or getting a smack for being wrong.

Having a school culture which accorded such prominence to educative dialogues also says something about the role of leadership in sustaining reform for social justice.

### *Educative leadership*

Leadership is often conceptualised in instrumental and hierarchical ways that categorise people as either leaders—those who exercise power over others, or followers—those who are subject to the authority of designated leaders (Smyth, 1997). According to conventional thinking, 'good' leaders have a vision of how an organisation should function and are able to instil this vision in others so that there is some collective ownership of organisational goals and a shared corporate culture. Much of this kind of logic has permeated the literature on educational management and the visionary role of principals is well-entrenched in manuals on school leadership (Angus, 1996).

But other more inclusive and enlightened models of leadership do exist. During a group interview with my informants, our conversation turned to a recent leadership team meeting in

which the question of leadership was put under the spotlight. Here is an extract from the transcript.

*Margaret*

We were choosing some photographs that we thought represented the leadership team . . . a couple of the choices were a spider web and a quarry or something with layers of earth.

*David*

Yes, or the geology of a mountain.

*Margaret*

For the spider web . . . the strength comes from the interconnectedness and the interrelatedness of the web; it doesn't depend on any one strand and so you can have a break in the web but the rest of it holds things together until that gets repaired.

*Neil*

True.

*Margaret*

And it was the same with the photograph of the quarry that somebody chose-they were looking at the multilayered effect that grows in all sorts of directions, not just up: but the strength being in the layers, not in any one personality.

*Peter (self)*

So it's distributional leadership that you're talking about?

*Neil*

Yes.

Metaphors often capture the essence of human interpretations in ways that can elude more abstract explanations of practices and events. In this instance, teachers' images associated with the spider web and the quarry seemed to convey something of their understanding of how leadership was enacted in the school. Their descriptions of the interconnectedness of the web and the multilayered nature of the quarry led me to conclude that what they were referring to could best be described as a form of distributional leadership in which authority was vested in the team itself rather than any individuals. In contrast to the bureaucratic and functional notions of leadership they expressed a belief in collective agency as the basis of curriculum leadership.

As I observed the daily life of the school and the various forums where teachers gathered to discuss ideas, it seemed to me that there was considerable evidence to support this participatory conception of leadership. Although the principals had specific responsibilities for the administration of the school sections they operated as co-principals-so much so that I was rarely aware of their individual duties. The collective nature of this leadership was

apparent not only in the day-to-day administration of the school but in the ways in which they worked to promote whole school reform and teachers' learning in staff meetings, collegiate teams and the various curriculum committees. Some other qualities of this leadership were revealed by Jim:

They're getting their power by not being powerful. They delegate, they trust, they are there to listen, they share together and they reflect and model that to the staff.

Educative leadership at Wattle Plains also seemed to accept a certain amount of dissonance. In fact, there was a view as well that a certain level of dissent was a healthy sign rather than a cause for consternation—a point made by Olivia when she suggested:

When people disagree with a point or a decision or whatever, then that to me shows that they do care and they're interested and they have a stake in the school and they're concerned with all things about the school.

Olivia's comments suggest that the school had created dialogic spaces in which dissenting voices could be heard—and no doubt challenged—by their colleagues in an educative and productive manner. But it was apparent that those wanting change had to argue their case in a persuasive manner—they could not, in Margaret's words, 'get away with just being a blocker'. Whilst this may not have silenced opposition to sanctioned change it did at least give those with alternative views the opportunity to speak out in public rather than having to vent their opinions in the car park or behind closed doors.

For Sally, too, the importance of keeping dialogue open was a vital element in educative leadership. On the question of resistance she explained that:

The way that it's dealt with may vary on the situation and vary with the person that is resisting. Sometimes it might look like debating and having dialogue with that person about a learning conversation with them about, why they feel that way and trying to engage them in thinking about the issues. So I think it's opening up the opportunities for those people to be able to say what they feel, or to debate what they feel, which I think is really important.

But she suggested that there were also limits to sustaining these kinds of dialogues—at some point it was necessary to move the dialogue on so that action could occur. She noted:

across the staff the range of understanding, and attitudes, to poverty is huge. If we waited till we've convinced everybody before we moved on, we'd never ever move on. I think the momentum is there and we try in all the ways that we can to engage people who are resistant.

### **Pedagogy—the classroom connection**

Although the role of school structures and culture has been particularly significant in maintaining an alternative approach to a marketised model of education at Wattle Plains, a capacity to sustain socially just curriculum is likely to hinge on the pedagogical relationships that characterise the school community. Fundamentally, it is teachers who mediate the relationship between the curriculum and students in the classroom and, as Shor (1992, p. 48) explains, it is 'through day-to-day lessons (that) teaching links the students' development to the values, powers and debates in society'. In my study I have explored several dimensions of the school's efforts to enact socially just curriculum through:

- the notion of a curriculum entitlement, generally described as a broad and balanced curriculum;
- the fostering of a culture of success-oriented learning;
- an emphasis on multicultural education which celebrated the school's cultural diversity, incorporated Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum and attempted to promote some sense of shared values in the school community; and,
- the development of critical literacies, especially through the visual and performing arts.

In this paper I will restrict my analysis to three areas-curriculum rigour, explicit teaching and the arts curriculum

### *Rigorous curriculum*

One of the difficulties confronting teachers revolves around the overcrowded curriculum. Sophie posed the problem as follows: 'How do you do fit seven areas of curriculum into a week and how do you do it rigorously?' The challenge of an overcrowded curriculum became the pivotal concern of a Broad and Balanced Curriculum Project which provided release time for teachers to plan integrated curriculum and explore holistic approaches to learning-notably through the visual and performing arts. Most importantly, the project involved teachers in investigating 'rigorous' (or 'authentic') approaches to learning. Just what this involved in this process was explained by Olivia:

. . . a rigorous curriculum has a purpose; the children know that purpose and are involved in the way that they're going to achieve it and it's relevant to them. Some of the teachers talk about things that haven't worked and then they come at it from a different angle and because the children are motivated and because there's a purpose to that, like organising excursions to the wetlands or working with the (local council) to revitalise the wetlands, they can see a purpose in that and so they'll come about in a really positive way but if it's not relevant and it's not purposeful and it's not motivating and the children don't have a say in it then to me it's not rigorous.

Olivia believed that it was necessary for students to see the relevance of schooling and to engage in challenging and useful tasks-not just 'busy work'. In the case of the environmental project, students could see the purpose behind their learning because it involved them in practical activities aimed at revitalising the local wetlands that many used as a recreational amenity. Not only was this activity situated in the lives of the students, but it was also effective in that it involved them in active experiences geared towards the improvement of a local resource. The real challenge for teachers at Wattle Plains, according to Olivia, was to motivate students by exploring 'different angles' and negotiating curriculum themes and topics with students. Such a position accords with Macedo's (1994, p.177) view that any extension of democratic practices in schools means 'developing pedagogies that speak to the reality of culture produced by students' rather than imposing externally developed courses on them.

### *Explicit teaching*

Speaking of the empowering possibilities of education, Shor (1992, p 20) argues that 'participation challenges the experience of education as something done to children' and opens up the possibility of transforming students' power of thought. Many teachers at Wattle Plains were working towards a more student-centred pedagogy but this did not mean that

they had abandoned their authority in favour of some laissez-faire practices. On the contrary, many of my informants saw that they had a responsibility to bring their own knowledge to bear on the curriculum so as to stimulate critical thinking and broaden their world views (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997). They also recognised the need for explicit teaching. David claimed that there was a close correlation between aggressive, antisocial behaviour and school failure and he stated that many teachers were 'looking at how to be more explicit about skills so that students could be successful'. He believed that explicit (or expository) teaching was especially necessary for students in poverty and those from non-English speaking backgrounds who often lacked the linguistic and educational resources to support formal learning at home. In David's classroom, students were informed about the purpose of their learning, assessment criteria were made quite transparent and the walls were adorned with posters and charts explaining how to successfully undertake such diverse tasks as conducting scientific investigations, preparing surveys, writing persuasive arguments and narrative accounts, and running a classroom meeting.

It is not difficult to make the links between socially just curriculum and the kind of explicit teaching that occurred in David's classroom. Because many of his students lacked the social capital that middle-class students bring to school, it was imperative that the school provided sufficient scaffolding for them to build on existing knowledge and experience success. Without such resources the idea of a curriculum entitlement was little more than a hollow promise. It was evident that whilst David did not resort to didactic teaching of the sort embodied in a 'banking model' of education (Freire, 1993) he nonetheless accepted that he had a responsibility to help students read the world (Freire, 1994). Such a responsibility went beyond an act of caring (however necessary that might be) to encompass a view of teaching as a political act. In a preface to *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (Freire, 1998) the series editors, Steinberg, Kincheloe and McLaren, remind us that:

children are not taught and empowered by caring alone; children are taught by good teachers who do not abrogate their responsibility to teach, provide students with an agenda, and correct students when necessary. (p. xxii)

However, explicit teaching in itself is no guarantee of socially just outcomes unless it is accompanied by liberatory practices which engage students in participatory forms of learning that develop skills of critical inquiry and encourage students to look beyond the four walls of the classroom. The need for structure, according to Shor (1992) should be balanced with open and democratic practices so that whilst:

(t)he teacher brings lesson plans, learning methods, personal experience, and academic knowledge to class (he or she) negotiates the curriculum with students and begins with their language, themes and understandings. (p. 16)

Such a position implies a constructivist view of knowledge in which subject matter is oriented to student culture and students are seen as constructors of culture and agents of change rather than passive objects or empty vessels. This was most evident in the school's arts program.

### *The visual arts*

The school's decision to develop the arts as a curriculum priority followed an extensive community consultation in which many children expressed a desire to learn more about the visual and performing arts. Perhaps the most spectacular breakthrough came with the painting of the murals on the school grounds and buildings—a project largely initiated by Boris following his passionate plea to the staff about the need to revitalise the learning

environment and 'to get kids painting for the sheer joy of painting'. He was quite clear about the curriculum value of the murals which, he said, should:

enhance the school with colour and aesthetic value . . . and be compatible with the surrounding area. The thing that's really important is that the murals should not be seen as simply a decorative add-on . . . the idea is that it evolves from the work that teachers are doing in the class-so it's a celebration of the learning that the children are doing in a visual way.

Boris saw the murals as educational artefacts with the potential to enliven learning across the curriculum as well as transforming the appearance of the school. 'The intent', he said, was that 'every mural would be a form of learning; you would learn from looking at it'. Not only did he have a vision for the murals but he also had drawn up plans to show how they could be designed and prepared by teachers and their classes. Having won over the staff, he arranged for them to be released for a whole day professional development activity to plan and paint the first mural, during which time he gave instructions about the geometry of the design and technical aspects of the art work. Boris then worked with individual teachers and groups of students to prepare a whole set of murals for the school grounds and buildings. The project took on a community dimension with a number of parents helping class groups whilst others painted sections of the seascape on the school perimeter fence. According to Boris, the process was managed in a variety of ways but generally the scenes depicted on the murals emerged from what students were studying in class. He observed that:

Some teachers have adopted a democratic way of managing the murals that they've done right from the outset, even in terms of choosing the topic . . . they had meetings together and they worked out a short list and voted and they agreed on doing that theme, and then the teachers worked with the children on the images which were then transferred onto the wall.

In some instances two, three or even four classes worked on a large mural, a task that required an immense amount of planning and teamwork; in some cases a single class took responsibility for a smaller piece. Often the murals represented the final products of a class project and were a celebration and enduring reminder of the students' learning. The murals portrayed a diversity of themes ranging from myths, legends, landscapes and cultural emblems to geometric patterns and shapes-themes that reflected the broad scope of the curriculum and the multicultural character of the community. An Aboriginal mural painted by indigenous artists was a vivid reminder of the heritage and spiritual traditions of the Ngarrindjeri people. Although many of the images sought to affirm children's culture some contained a critical edge, as illustrated in the mural of the fairytale which challenged prevailing stereotypes by depicting a woman as a knight in shining armour.

Whilst the school's program engaged students in many other facets of the arts, including cartoons, sculpturing and painting, the murals captured my imagination because of their scale, vibrancy and public visibility. They spoke to me of a living curriculum that embodied many of the progressive facets of education that I had observed at Wattle Plains: notably, the high levels of collaboration within the community; the use of generative themes arising from students' knowledge and culture; and, the affective domain of learning arising from the participatory nature of the activities. In many respects the murals could be viewed as cultural artefacts and educational resources which had a pedagogical value to the school and community extending beyond the life of the projects in which they were originally conceived. They projected a public image about the values and aspirations of the school that helped to reinforce a commitment to cultural inclusivity and sensitivity to the aesthetic environment.

Amongst the hotchpotch of rather drab looking transportable buildings they made the school come alive.

### **Living with ambiguities**

Contesting market-driven and utilitarian approaches to schooling is a far from comfortable experience because it means that committed teachers have to live with a good deal of dissonance and tension in their lives. Cochran-Smith (1991) argues that teachers attempting to sustain a critical pedagogy are 'teaching against the grain' of conventional and entrenched practices, whilst Freire (1985) likens the struggle for liberatory schooling to that of 'swimming against the tide'. Evaluating the Disadvantaged Schools Program, Connell, Johnstone and White (1992) used the phrase 'running twice as hard' to convey some understanding of the extra effort needed in DSP schools to achieve comparable educational outcomes with those in middle-class communities.

Perhaps each of these metaphors could be fruitfully applied to the struggle for school reform at Wattle Plains but I am particularly attracted to the phrase 'living with ambiguity' as a means of expressing the contradictory themes and elements involved in teaching for social justice. A state of ambiguity denotes a measure of uncertainty and the presence of discordant notes in the day-to-day events and discourses that characterise teachers' lives. Teachers working for socially just schooling often have to coexist with practices and ideologies that appear to be diametrically opposed to their own values; they have to endure a large measure of discomfort as they grapple with the incongruities and contradictions that abound in their own school, the public education system and society at large. In times when discourses of marketisation, vocationalism and managerialism threaten to obliterate more egalitarian goals of public education it is appropriate to ask:

- What stands in the way of indigenous responses to curriculum reform for social justice?
- To what degree can schools engage in a productive manner with system priorities and goals without abandoning their own approaches to socially just schooling?
- What strategies might progressive educators develop in order to sideline or marginalise the most oppressive elements of the neo-liberal agenda?
- How might they redefine or appropriate prevailing discourses to advance grassroots reform for social justice?

In my study I have looked specifically at the tensions and contradictory features arising from:

- the school's participation in the Basic Skills Tests;
- its engagement with marketisation, enterprise education and vocationalism;
- gender issues, especially the education of girls;
- efforts to promote critically reflective practices; and,
- the maintenance of educative and distributive forms of leadership.

In this paper I will confine my remarks to the questions of marketisation and school leadership.

## Marketisation-the Wattle Plains Graduate

Schools have always engaged in image enhancement but the imperative to marketise education has taken on new dimensions in the wake of more competitive schooling arrangements and the recent history of school closures in South Australia. Although Wattle Plains was a member of a regional cluster of state schools it nonetheless competed with several public and private schools for a declining number of students in the outer metropolitan region. Sustaining cooperative arrangements with neighbouring schools whilst promoting the school's educational programs clearly created some dilemmas for Wattle Plains staff, as Margaret explained.

We'll promote our school quite strongly on celebratory occasions through the newsletter but not to the detriment of other schools. But there is a certain amount of community gossip out there about Wattle Plains and other schools, and so we'll get people from outside our district and from other schools wanting to bring their kids to (our school) because they've heard positive things about us. Aboriginal parents and parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, or sometimes kids that are struggling with literacy and they've heard that if they come to Wattle Plains they'll learn to read.

Although there was some unease about 'poaching' students from other schools there was nonetheless a recognition of the need to publicise the school's educational programs and resources within the community. To this end, multicultural festivals, Grandparents Day, sports days, concerts and celebratory events were used to actively promote the schools arts, technology, literacy and Aboriginal studies programs within the local community. In addition the school was never backward in utilising professional associations and DETE educational publications such as *XPress* to inform the broader educational community of progressive practices and curriculum projects.

Quite apart from competitive pressures associated with neighbouring state schools, Wattle Plains also had to contend with parental perceptions about the benefits of a private education. Sophie argued that there was a widespread community view that private schooling was superior to public schooling-this despite parents' admission that 'they love the school, love their child's teacher and are really supportive of the school and the programs'. Margaret commented further on the taken-for-granted view about the superiority of private schooling :

(Parents) will still say things like they really wish that they could have the money to send their child to a private school because they know that they're letting them down by sending them to a public school. But when you ask them what they reckon they'd get at a private school that they wouldn't get at Wattle Plains they don't really know; but they know that they're supposed to think that.

How is it that parents know 'that they're supposed to think that'? We discussed how perceptions about the advantages of private schooling become normalised through the media and everyday life and talked in particular about a recent television advertisement urging parents to invest in a banking scheme so that they could afford to send their children to a private school. This illustration, and Margaret's observations about the power of community gossip, show how difficult it is to dispel myths and taken-for-granted assumptions about public and private schools, especially in the present political context where the notion of parental choice is enshrined in policy. Even though many were prepared to acknowledge that Wattle Plains was an inclusive school which catered far more adequately for the needs

of students with disabilities they still clung to a conviction that private schooling had to be a better option for their children.

In this competitive environment finding a niche in the educational market to lure prospective clients can become an all encompassing passion for schools. There was little doubt in Wattle Plains that principals were keen to promote their school as a progressive and innovative institution to parents and the wider educational community. To reinforce the message a glossy information brochure proclaimed Wattle Plains as a 'learning community', 'a focus school for the arts and technology' and a school 'committed to continually improving the quality of teaching and learning outcomes'. In a calculated reference to a credentialling process the brochure spelled out the attributes of the Wattle Plains Graduate in terms of the following outcomes.

The Wattle Plains Graduate has high self-esteem and is responsible and competent in all 8 curriculum areas. The Wattle Plains graduate is cooperative and can work effectively in teams and has good conflict resolution skills. The Wattle Plains Graduate can access information and communicate it orally, in writing and graphically. The Wattle Plains Graduate is literate, numerate, socially skilled, able to set goals and has initiative. The Wattle Plains Graduate is organised and committed to education.

It should be noted that there is no formally recognised graduation event in the early years of schooling in South Australia so the notion of 'the Wattle Plains Graduate' could be interpreted merely as a marketing ploy to enhance the image of the school's educational program. On the other hand, to draw on Deever's (1996, p. 255) language of 'tactical appropriation', it might also be regarded as an politically astute way of representing the school's valued educational outcomes.

Issues to do with school promotion and marketisation call into question the role of school leadership in contemporary schooling. To what extent are principals able to maintain an educative presence in schools amidst a discourse of managerialism?

### **Sustaining educative leadership**

I believe that 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 meekly submit 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.

These observations highlight the role of school leaders in school reform for social justice and they invite some reflection on schools' capacities to maintain the momentum for change when principals and key personnel move on. When I raised this issue with one of my informants she responded:

I would like to think that the culture of the place is strong enough to resist a completely different philosophy, in terms of social justice . . . but for how long and to what effect I don't know; I can't predict that.

How crucial are principals to grassroots reform? Does Wattle Plains have the necessary structures, institutional practices and pedagogical knowledge to sustain long-lasting reform for social justice in the absence of the kind of leadership described above? A reading of the literature on school reform reveals some rather mixed answers to these questions, ranging from May's (1998) somewhat depressing reflections of the short-lived nature of change at Richmond Road School, to Goodman's (1992) more encouraging account of an enduring legacy of reform at Harmony School. In what follows, I want to briefly explore the relationship between leadership practices and sustainable reform as revealed in these studies before returning to Wattle Plains and the dilemmas facing principals as they confront what Seddon (1995, p. 38) refers to as 'the crisis of educational leadership in Australia.'

When Stephen May wrote his critical ethnographic study of Richmond Road School, a multi-ethnic elementary school in Auckland, New Zealand (May, 1994), he expressed confidence in the school's capacity to sustain a radical approach to multicultural education set in place by the principal Jim Laughton and successor Lionel Penderson. At the time, he believed that distributive forms of leadership helped to promote a sense of ownership of the school reform agenda, whilst inclusive and collaborative approaches to training and development meant that new teachers were quickly inducted into the ethos of the school. However, to May's disappointment much of Laughton's progressive program was dismantled in wake of conservative education reforms in the late 1990s and the school has since reverted to a more traditional and monocultural approach in its educational programs. Reflecting on the account (May, 1998) concluded; 'what I also recognised at the time and, what has become clearer since, is that the Principal's influence is critical to any subsequent process of continuity or change' (p. 162). He believed that in hindsight he had failed to make more explicit the ambiguities and tensions he had encountered in his research as well as underplaying the directive influence Laughton exerted in the school.

In contrast to the tenuous and fragile nature of school reform at Richmond Road, (Goodman, Baron, & Myers, 1999a; Goodman et al., 1999b) Goodman's account of schooling for democracy in Harmony School—an independent school in Bloomington USA—offers a more positive reading of the prospects of grassroots reform for emancipatory ideals. In his original interpretive study, *Elementary schooling for critical democracy*, Goodman set out to explore the pedagogical practices and school structures that fostered the development of a critical social democracy—the stated philosophy of the school. He described a school in which he believed a 'connectionist pedagogy' and commitment to shared responsibility and community values had worked to undermine a prevailing ethos of individualism and competition.

Shortly after the study Goodman established the Harmony Education Centre 'for the purpose of fostering conversations between educators at Harmony and other reform-minded schools, policy makers and scholars' (Goodman, Baron & Myers, 1999a). This has enabled him to sustain an ongoing involvement in Harmony School as an 'external change agent' (Goodman, 1994) and to observe at close hand the efficacy of reforms for a democratic school culture. Reflecting on the experience of Harmony and other like-minded schools (Goodman et al., 1999a) argue that sustainable school-based reform is contingent on three major factors; namely, 'establishing democratic structures, promoting the voices in a given school community, and providing ways of working through conflict' (p. 5). The question of ownership is crucial, according to Goodman, for unless many groups are directly involved in school reform they are likely to have a short shelf life. Finally, as the experience at Harmony School testifies, the prospects of successful school-based reform are greatly enhanced through transferable (or distributional) forms of leadership.

How do these accounts of school reform at Richmond Road and Harmony School resonate with the Wattle Plains experience? From my perspective leadership at Wattle Plains was more broadly distributed amongst the principals, the deputy and the coordinators—the latter in

particular having a significant influence on curriculum reform. In contrast to Richmond Road, the collegiate teams, curriculum committees and other structures that supported teachers' learning and pedagogical change also seemed to be much more embedded within the school culture at Wattle Plains. Although the principals' educative presence in these forums was significant they did not rely exclusively upon them for their ideas and direction; in other words ownership of the school's reform agenda was broadly shared by the school community-it did not reside solely in the hands of a charismatic leader.

In spite of these observations, the capacity of leadership to advance more egalitarian goals of schooling must remain somewhat problematic in a political climate of devolution, corporate managerialism and marketisation. Discussing the historical shifts in the role of school leadership, Seddon (1995) contrasts the participatory and democratic practices of the 1970s and 1980s with managerialist ways of operating in the 1990s where parents tend to be treated as consumers and teachers are largely relegated to subordinate positions in the hierarchy. Seddon's remarks support mounting evidence from the United Kingdom (Grace, 1995; Simkins, 1994), New Zealand (Harold, 1999; Sullivan, 1994) and Australia (Smyth, 1993)(Smyth, 1993; Blackmore, 1998) of a major transformation in the role of principals from educational leaders to business managers (or corporate heads) as neo-liberal governments push for self-managing schools.

Clearly there are additional tensions for principals committed to socially just practices when competitive market-driven approaches are allowed to take hold in schools. In these circumstances it is pertinent to ask: how can school leaders contest this new agenda? how might they begin to reconfigure leadership that is much more anchored in the social realities of schools? Questions of this kind also bring to the fore the viability of grassroots reform for social justice. Do local schools have the necessary resources and the capacity to go it alone?

### **Grassroots reform-'romantic localism'?**

Although there may be touchstones or principles to guide local programs (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Kemmis, 1994) and pedagogical practices (Shor, 1992) each school ultimately has to develop its own reading of social justice that takes account of these complexities (Griffiths, 1998a). Above all, teachers need to be regarded as key players in school reform since they (rather than education bureaucrats) are closest to the lives of students (Connell, 1993; Zeichner, 1993) and best able to develop curriculum that is attuned to their needs and aspirations. However, it is difficult to see how the oppressive aspects of managerialism and marketisation can be contested solely within the perimeters of a neighbourhood school- indeed to believe that this is possible is to indulge in 'romantic localism' (Troyna & Vincent, 1995, p. 155). Furthermore, although moves towards global budgeting and self management might create an illusion of autonomy, the notion of schools as stand-alone entities competing for a market share of the educational stakes (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000) in a context of dwindling resources for public education is more likely exacerbate inequalities amongst schools thus undermining the notion of a public education system.

When I contemplate the damaging consequences of this kind of local school management I am reminded of the immortal (if somewhat Eurocentric and sexist) words of the 17th century English poet John Donne:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of the friends or, of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(John Donne, 1624, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions 'Meditation XV11')

Donne's reflections on the interconnectedness of humanity and the notion of it means to be part of society as distinct from simply having an individual existence could well serve as a reminder of the dangers inherent in marketised versions of local school management. Just as the death of another being diminishes me in some way, so too does the demise or closure of a struggling school community diminish the public education system as a whole. When the bell tolls, or the siren sounds to herald the final school assembly of schools like the one I described at the beginning of this paper, it sends a message to all public school communities about their own vulnerability. Something of the same sentiment is conveyed in Connell's (1993) words when he comments about the moral character of educational institutions:

If the school system is dealing unjustly with some of its pupils, they are not the only ones to suffer. The quality for all others is degraded. (p. 15)

Because the possibility of a education nurturing the formation of a socially just society hinges on the existence of a well-resourced and vibrant public education system, local action therefore needs to be combined with collective action involving the whole of the public school sector, education unions and community coalitions.

## **Conclusions**

Perhaps the notion of a socially just school will always remain a utopian vision rather than a cultural artefact. But I believe that this study has shown how a school that is prepared to struggle for socially just relationships can make a difference for students whose lives are often fractured by poverty and cultural oppression. Without discounting the external constraints to grassroots reform I believe that there are some spaces within schools for committed teachers to contest oppressive practices; to foster and model democratic practices; to develop curriculum which connects with the lives and concerns of students; to engage students in the acquisition of critical literacies; and to work towards a more humane and socially just society.

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