

## **Thinking for Social Justice in the Curriculum**

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### Abstract:

This paper reports the role of teachers in curriculum decision making. It reports work from research which examined teachers' attitudes to and perceptions of curriculum, specifically thinking skills programs. Further, it explores the connections between the development of teacher thinking and social action in the pursuit of democratic and socially just schooling. Despite these goals frequenting the rhetoric, progress in the delivery of such education seems somewhat stifled. The argument proposed is that improving resources and opportunities for conscious teacher thinking and action in the organisation of learning and delivery of curriculum can improve learning outcomes for all students and support socially just and democratic practice.

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## Introduction

A group of teachers in an elite secondary college wanted to develop an approach to curriculum which would encourage the students to think before they criticised, bullied or forced their point of view on others. When first discussing thinking skills programs, the teachers were concerned that the students would become more intolerant of others as a result of learning to ask questions, challenge and critique ideas and practices.

*'If I encourage kids to think in creative and critical ways and to seek out and challenge contradictions in material that is presented to them, won't they be aggressive in other classes? Won't students who have had this type of primary schooling become easily bored in traditional secondary classes when they go to secondary school? Won't they challenge everything I say?'* (Year 6 teacher)

When it is a concern that critical and thoughtful students might be disruptive, why would teachers choose to allow their students to become powerful through developing their ability to question, discern and think creatively? Yet, many teachers, including those in the account above, behave in exactly the same way, challenging and questioning accepted practices and in doing so seek this kind of program for their students to develop just these skills and attitudes.

Across town only thirty minutes away, the day begins for the principal of a primary school with a phone call from a parent who says the children will not be at school that day because there is no food for breakfast or lunch. It is difficult for this principal to concentrate on matters such as thinking skills. It is also to be expected that these children will not participate in any extra-curricula or out of school organised activities, and neither would their friends. Most of the children do not have English as the main language at home. At this school, the latest initiative is not a palm top computer for individual students, but a breakfast program and attempts to include a thinking skills program as a specific addition to the curriculum! What motivates teachers to change the curriculum in an environment which Lingard says is typified by a *'condition of reform fatigue when we are constantly being asked to do more with less?'* (1995, p. 11).

The culture of this school is vastly different from its middle class neighbours in the same city. In recent research (Cherednichenko 2000) more than 60% of the teachers in working class schools reported that as parents could not afford extra-curricula programs, camps and day excursions were kept to a minimum. Many of these teachers are looking for programs that have an impact on basic skills but also enrich other aspects of student learning. In schools where teachers are confronted with daily struggles for student success due to hunger, unemployment, lack of parental support and presence, the knowledge that more is possible is what sustains and encourages them. It is this culture of inquiry about practice and critical constructivism to improve it that distinguishes the work of those teachers who are actively working against the conservation of the school culture, expectations and pre-determined student learning outcomes.

The nature of disadvantage and that children born into privileged families are more likely to succeed in school and in life, has been well documented (see for example Bourdieu 1998, Connell 1984, New 1995, Teese 2000). Bourdieu (1998) reports the perception of children of privilege as precocious and their displays of maturity, sophisticated language and experience as *'indicators of gifts'* (p. 20). Regardless of any genetically inherited traits, these children inherit the prestigious culture of success and its associated high status and are so able to access and strategically use social and economic power. The importance of cultural and economic capital as criteria for membership of the powerful social class is explained by

Bourdieu through his investigation of class distinction and practices which seek to understand social relationships and inequities. He recognises the importance of family background and financial standing as well as linguistic development as indicators of cultural capital which construct a perception of the child as ready to learn and destined for achievement. More recently Teese (2000) has closely examined the impact of these factors on students in secondary schools in Victoria, noting significant differences in schooling outcomes across the state. These differences are aligned very closely with social class.

This paper reports research which investigated the addition of thinking skills programs in the primary school curriculum. It surveyed the attitudes and perceptions about students and curriculum of one hundred and twenty teachers across Melbourne and found that within the broad scope of schools there is evidence of the ability of teachers both to comply with and resist the pressures which sustain social difference. Using a class analysis, the research examined the values and beliefs of teachers and the influences which their experience and understanding of the socio-economic context exert.

### **Teacher Thinking about Change**

When teachers believe that students are emotionally and socially secure, they will teach in a way that enhances this security and enriches the life experiences of the child. Children who present as competent and easy to work with in a primary classroom have a much greater chance of being presented with an intellectually and academically advanced curriculum, as well as an introduction to the high culture pursuits which carry prestige in the society. If teachers are concerned for the child's emotional and social well-being, they will address these issues first and construct the learning environment with this as the essential goal. The judgements teachers make about students very often do not acknowledge the social judgements which teachers are also making. Teachers have lower expectations of the behaviour and academic outcomes for students from working class backgrounds than they do for wealthier students, regardless of student ability (New, 1996). This occurs as the pressing needs for the child's physical and emotional well-being mask the intellectual potential and diminish opportunities for a curriculum which is mainly focused on intellectual development. In this sense teachers treat children unequally; that is, they set priorities for the curriculum away from academic achievement, even though they believe academic attainment is an important goal for students.

Schools are able to provide an enriching curriculum for students who demonstrate precociousness. The primary school teachers in wealthier schools in this research report that they navigate the learning pathway for students through their own knowledge and values, the aspirations of parents and the needs and abilities of students and within differing resource and policy structures. This selection process commences from the early years of schooling. They are aware of the *apparent* advanced intellectual development of their students.

Because the working classes do not have access to the mechanisms for understanding, appreciating and utilising tools of the valued culture, it does not follow that they are unable to appreciate it and understand it from their own perspective (Frow 1995). Yet, Bourdieu (1998) insists that even though they are able to interact with prestigious cultural activities, access to increased social mobility is impeded unless the tools for access are developed. The role then of the school in constructing or deconstructing barriers to social mobility and supporting access must be understood at both the institutional and personal level. While it is possible to draw generalisations about the behaviour, values and thinking of teachers, obviously not all teachers behave in the same way. The deeply personal nature of teaching ensures that action and response are highly individualised, although this research has also shown that teachers in similar environments do share strong cultural, social and educational values and

practices. Indeed the teachers in schools in working class communities in this study demonstrate a shared thinking about student educational needs. Although thinking skills programs are not generally found in working class schools, the teachers who conduct these programs report their motives as focused on supporting the learning needs of the students especially the gifted and talented but also to improve communication, questioning and inquiry skills. They are not offered in an attempt to develop independence and choice *not* to emulate private school curriculum.

*'Kids are not given opportunities to speak up at home. There is only one way to do things, and that is the way parents say. It is just different.'*(Teacher, working class school public school)

The introduction and application of thinking skills programs as additional curriculum as examined in this work has highlighted the critical role of teacher beliefs, values and attitudes and the external factors which influence teacher actions in shaping the curriculum. Thinking skills programs are unevenly represented in schools, with a strong presentation in private schools and middle class public schools. The tendency toward this type of curriculum in middle class schools and the teacher thinking and action which supports the geographical pattern of location of thinking skills programs is driven by social class, school culture and teacher values and behaviour.

*'In choosing this school they assume they are buying a successful schooling experience for their children, automatic entry into prestigious university courses and associated connections.'* (Teacher, private school)

Much has been written about the role society, schools and teachers play as powerful social structures and agents in construction of an unjust social and educational experience for young people. Bowles and Gintis (1976), Bourdieu (1998), Connell (1994), Eisner (1979), Havighurst and Levine (1979), Welch (1996) and Willis (1977) and others have argued that many teachers, supported by the social structure of school, have enabled the maintenance of social division. They argue that as teachers respond to government pressure and their own experience they unconsciously foster a differentiated and unequal class system.

Yet, this research has found that while there are few working class schools where teaching thinking was highlighted, the teachers who do engage in this activity as an alternative to the government directed curriculum, do so to enhance the education experience and improve opportunities in literacy and social skills for children. The teachers have a view of the curriculum that has stimulated the development of these programs. They reflect a sense of agency as a response to parent demands and their own understanding of students for a different kind of outcome from that which is normally expected.

This research confirms that individual teachers can make a difference and offers an explanation of the supporting and inhibiting factors in the process of change. It offers a view of the teacher as a conduit of social acquisition, an interpreter of connections between social needs and their personal values and beliefs. Teachers demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of students as they filter the demands of parents and society in fulfilling student needs. They undertake an extremely important task as they interpret the social and educational environment, both local and more global, and then through the curriculum, connect these factors. The decisions that result from this thinking are critical for students' futures. The research has found that teacher intentions are that the change should be for improvement, and their primary goal of care and attention to the needs of individual students motivates this change. In their discussion of innovation and change, Harper (1979) and Fullan (1982, 1991) both assert that the key to innovation is the need, or motivation, to move outside the realm of activity currently undertaken, in an attempt to change the outcomes. In this respect, the key

difference in the practices of teachers in middle class and working class communities is the factors which intercept their basic beliefs about education, so that their actions are very different. In both communities, the outcomes and practices differ, based on the interpretation of their role and the response to the learners and the learning environment.

Knowledge which teachers develop about their students and about pedagogy is the intellectual and practical basis for decision making about curriculum change. Taking agency to the point where this change represents innovation is not common in middle class schools. Usually regarded for their innovative practices, teachers in well-resourced schools are ideally placed to continue that tradition, embracing new ideas and pedagogy with commitment, support for teacher professional development and the acquisition of appropriate materials and facilities. Yet, this research challenges this perception: elite schools are not the sites of educational reform.

A strong propensity to implement change that supports the strategic competitive corporate image, traditions and position of the school in the marketplace is evident. As a result, changed practices in middle class schools represent a conservation of the culture of the parents despite teachers' practical consciousness about their actions and the consequences. This is because they are encouraged to extend the social advantage to these children through educational experiences. Actions which appear to counter the distinctive nature of the school or to soften the qualities which are associated with excellence in curriculum are discouraged. Interestingly, the view of what counts as success for these students is very conservative and traditional. It enables young people to develop skills and talents which will help them distinguish themselves – academic success, access to elite secondary schools, special programs and competitions for gifted and talent children.

Middle class schools have long been perceived as innovative and educational leaders. Selby-Smith (1971) proposes a range of educational practices which were lead by the private schools, enabled by their financial and social power and influence, as well as the demand from these powerful parents for elite and high quality education. Education for young women has been initiated and developed in the private sector, but Theobald (1991) reminds us that these were for daughters of privilege and many young women today would still not have access to the arts and humanities in the way these girls did last century. However, what has been shown through this research is that approaches to curriculum, to teaching and learning are more conservative, less challenged and the practices of teachers more closely aligned to the reproduction of the middle classes and social division than those of working class schools (Welch, 1996). Curriculum change in these schools serves to match, support, endorse and preserve parent, teacher and community expectations of parents, teachers and community and reflects the model for curriculum change presented in Figure 11.1.

In contrast, the practice described by teachers in working class schools is driven by a need to change learning opportunities and the social and educational outcomes for students, despite a chronic lack of cultural, educational and physical resources. Innovation in this case is motivated

*'through internal contradictions, such as when one or more groups in a society perceive a discrepancy between educational values and outcomes affecting themselves or others in whom they have an interest.'* (Fullan, 1991, p. 17)

As teachers in working class schools go about their daily practice, they are motivated by different social circumstances. Change presents as innovation, reflecting an informed consciousness about changing the social and cultural expectations, to expand possibilities

and opportunities for students and their learning. In so doing it serves to diminish the relative differences in schooling and so social outcomes for students, than would otherwise be achieved (Teese, 1999).

***Figure 1: The Changing Curriculum.***

This model represents a strategic view of a corporate school where change can be well meaning, but must also result in corporate gain such as family loyalty, high academic outcomes, popularity with the community, increased student demand through enrolments, improved prestige for the school's image and the status of teachers, students and parents associated with the school. Therefore few controversial decisions will be taken, intentionally and intervention will serve conservatism.

The incentive for teachers and parents to support existing social distinctions, is the assurance of a comfortable middle class future for their children. No contradiction or injustice exists in their personal experiences. The public perception is that wealthy private schools are good schools and that they are at the forefront of educational innovation. Teachers in middle class schools respond to the demands of parents, their perceptions of students, and the pressure of market, social and academic expectations.

Teachers in working class schools understand these pressures and expectations, are driven by the same educational values and beliefs, yet some of them are able to act to disturb the preconceived expectations of their students and the curriculum. Some are prepared to initiate and implement additional curriculum that is outside not only the government determined curriculum, but also the expectations of parents and community for the social and academic achievement of their students. These programs are beyond the demands of the society for technical competence in literacy and numeracy, and for welfare programs, as

adequate focus for educational energy in working class schools. Disturbance is created as teachers act to re-direct curriculum efforts despite the pressures from systems, parents and the most obvious needs of students. Innovations occur as attempts to improve outcomes through the application of curriculum that is more than the expected (Figure 11.2).

**Figure 2: The Innovating Curriculum.**

The teachers in working class schools in this study think and behave differently. They have reported that they are sensitive to parent desire for their children to achieve what is usually assumed, but they also recognise that students begin from a base of social and personal needs which can interrupt their potential to learn and achieve academic success. In constructing a curriculum which meets parent need for intellectual achievement, the social needs determined by teachers and attempts to open pathways to more advantaged futures, teachers adopt initiatives such as thinking skills programs and deliberately set out to change the curriculum flow which is otherwise assumed.

As constructivists, teachers in disadvantaged settings particularly, many demonstrate an ability to act in ways which reflect what Kincheloe has called '*critical constructivism*' (1993, p. 109). The ability of teachers to critically construct the curriculum is constrained by their own attitudes, knowledge and experience and the power of class, school culture, system support and resources. The sixty-two teachers in working class school in this study have demonstrated a critical consideration of the curriculum as they have sought new approaches which are not commonly implemented in similar classrooms.

**Framework for Interpreting Curriculum Decision Making in Schools**

The perceptions of teachers and their understandings about their students, their abilities and their learning environments are interrelated and inseparable. The consideration of the socio-cultural context of teacher thinking, behaviour, attitudes and actions is inclusive of all aspects of the act of teaching and learning. Artiles (1996) suggests the construction of a new knowledge base for researching teaching, learning and thinking which is eclectic, interdisciplinary and based on the notion that learning is linked to socio-cultural factors. There are a number of factors contributing to teacher knowledge and theories of teaching which inform their decision making and which answer the research question.

The following diagram offers a model of decision making emerging from the research which interprets the relationship between four key fields of influence in curriculum decision making and which operate at two distinct levels, school and community.

### **Figure 3: Interpretative Framework for Curriculum Decision Making**

#### **A: School Influences**

Within the school environment the direct fields of influence are:

- *Educational Delivery: Teaching and Learning*

The educational delivery for which the school is responsible includes curriculum provision and the range of curriculum offerings which are implemented, the policies that shape the practice of curriculum, the priorities the school sets for development, the personal relationships which exist and are fostered between teachers, parents and students, and the resources which are available and the way in which they are distributed to support programs.

- *Institutional Profile: Corporate Identity of the Institution*

The school's identity and profile is developed through the School Charter and the embedded practices and policies which define the school, such as school uniform, the interpretation of its corporate values and traditions, the location and status of the school within the market, the profile of staff and the strategic development and visioning drives school decision making.

#### **B: Community Influences**

Within the community context the direct fields of influence are:

- *Community Context: Social Identity of Students*

Within the context of the school's community the identity of students is shaped by the socio-economic conditions of the local community, which in turn are influenced by the wider context; the cultural mix and diversity of the community; the level and distribution of community services and resources; and the location of the school, in urban, industrial or rural settings.

- *Global Perspective: Government, System and Policy Macro-economic Conditions.*

The overarching policies and structures of government and education systems with regard to education, economic management and industrial relations are highly influential in the way in which schools evolve and construct their curriculum.

As teachers engage in a process of change or innovation, the practice of teaching and learning will be delivered at the intersection of these influences. Innovation and change are responses to the interpretation of family needs and wants, as well as to teacher's education knowledge and experience, and set within the framework of policy and practice at both the global and local levels of management of education. Individual action is therefore always within the context of a wide range of structures and institutional forces. To act to repel these forces and change predicted outcomes is common in schools, but often unrecognised and unsupported. Teachers indicated that they are not encouraged to act to reject the powerful forces of community, government or school traditions.

In middle class schools, certain types of change are valued and heralded as innovative. In these settings any change, reformist, or conservative is subject to approval from a conservative community. In working class schools, the community is equally concerned about their child's education but less concerned with a competitive marketplace. The 'at risk' nature of many students demands that teachers themselves be risk-takers in their approach to curriculum reform. In each case the way the teacher interprets and understands the other conditions of the teaching and learning environment affects the practices in classrooms. This research has highlighted the importance of understanding the ways in which teachers think about their students, their families and their own goals and practices. It has also highlighted the differences in the thinking between groups of teachers working in different socio-economic communities and the impact of these social conditions on curriculum decision making and delivery.

The high incidence of thinking skills programs in schools in middle class suburbs reflects both the fact that the child presents as precocious on entering school with advanced social and reading skills, as well as drawing on teacher expectations that these children will learn easily and quickly, given their background. Parents endorse these expectations and the school's marketing strategy is centred on high achievement.

In working class communities the teacher is very aware of the variety of social and educational disadvantages which often disguise the children's abilities as they enter school. They therefore work to address these areas of disadvantage, but remain mindful of the child's right to access high levels of achievement and a range of educational opportunities.

Traditional measures do not always work and despite concerns that parents may not always understand, teachers will try new programs and approaches.

### **Implications for Educational and Social Change**

The differences between schools and schooling outcomes for young people of different social and class backgrounds are significant, serving to support the differentiated beginning points as children arrive at school. Some of the teachers in this research have indicated a conscious attempt to intercept to minimise these discrepancies, but they are still clearly accentuated by the time the child begins secondary schooling. Teachers are critical as agents in this process as they filter the curriculum, through the lens of their own knowledge and experience, and the distinctive and different goals of students and parents. The following model demonstrates the development of a deepening social divide and shows how it is enhanced through the practices of schools and educational bureaucracies.

### ***Figure 4: Structural Model of Operation for Schools and Innovation***

What is needed to begin to redress the cycle of social and education disadvantage is, firstly, a recognition of the knowledge that teachers bring to their work with children, as well as their ability and commitment to change the curriculum to meet the needs of these children. Some of the teachers who have decided to teach thinking skills have demonstrated this ability and are just one example of critical action: others have simply implemented a school decision. For abilities to be realised and fulfilled, teachers require more than just acknowledgment, however. Effective change is driven by the power to make decisions and to access the appropriate resources to work against the prevailing culture to act critically to construct positive experience and outcomes. The '*reform fatigue*' Lingard (1995) described can be re-energised if the process is focused on reform for student learning improvement and not economic rationalism driven change. Working against the prevailing culture is difficult, but sustained when the innovative change is connected to cultural change and supported by systems and government policy. The perceived influences of parents and community are as powerful as the explicit impact of system and policy in supporting and inhibiting change and innovation.

The potential for teachers to think and act critically in the delivery of educational and social outcomes is strong. This research has made clear the importance of teacher thinking and the role of parents and communities in curriculum development and change. In supportive collaborative and critical cultures, school reform is realised (Connell et al., 1991; Currie and Groundwater-Smith, 1998; Ladwig, et al., 1994). When the culture of the school supports conservative and traditional practices, there is less opportunity for teachers to re-direct their efforts to change outcomes (Maslen, 1982). Similarly, change is difficult when parents and teachers do not share an informed communication and shared understanding about the nature and purposes of curriculum, as was demonstrated in many schools.

*'...The growth of social reflexivity produces forms of "double discrimination" affecting the underprivileged. To the effects of material deprivation are added a disqualification from reflexive incorporation in the wider social order. Exclusionary mechanisms here are normally both social and psychological. In other words, they concern not only subjection to modes of power coming from the technical control of knowledge-based systems, but also attack the integrity of the self:...' (Giddens, 1994, p. 90)*

It is the development of the conscious reflexivity which Giddens has proposed as a catalyst for change creates the ability to change curriculum and to act on the discrepancies which are identified. For teachers, the potential for innovation is derived from the professional need to discover better ways to foster student learning. In working class and middle class schools the deep concern for student well being and development is evident. It fosters critical reflection and construction of the curriculum, but the system often acts to thwart any sustained attempt at change for improvement.

Teachers must have authority within the curriculum to re-define schooling practices, if equity is to be delivered. Yet while teachers may be critical actors in the change process, they do not, and cannot, act alone. Change, innovation for improvement, for equity, is the responsibility of all who work in education. It is an issue of both policy and practice and is the responsibility of system, communities, teachers and teacher education. Lingard claims that *'to achieve social justice in education we need to move towards more just practices which ensure more equal outcomes across target groups'* (1995, p. 9). There is consequently a need for reform on four levels:

- Practice in classrooms which is delivered through
- Planning for curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment that is innovative, child centred, and guided by
- Processes and procedures which structure the school and which are supported by
- Policy, set by government and systems which provide appropriate resources and structural change.

Without this systemic and policy support for practical reform, teachers will continue to struggle to address issues of equity and learning improvement in environments which very often serve to reduce the impact of their efforts and abilities.

The realisation of a socially just education system is unlikely, unless the ability and power of teachers to engage in curriculum innovation is recognised and resourced, and the full force of the pressures which both support and inhibit their agency is understood and managed. Additional attention to the role, agency and outcomes for students is also demanded. In a time when issues such as equity and social justice have fallen off the social and educational agenda, this research re-ignites the possibility that teachers are working to address such issues and that with renewed energy, resources and commitment to school reform. Many others are able to deliver the type of sustained educational change and innovation that is required to affect social equity.

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