Re-configuring a commitment to social justice in public schooling

Peter McInerney
Flinders University

MCIO1409

Paper presented at the
Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)
Annual Conference, Perth, 2–6 December 2001
Correspondence:

Dr Peter McInerney

Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching

School of Education

Flinders University

GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, SA, 5001

Email: peter.mcinerney@flinders.edu.au

Reconfiguring a commitment to social justice in public schooling

Abstract

The pursuit of social justice is inextricably linked to the maintenance of a vibrant, well funded and accessible education system (Connors, 2000). But there are unmistakable signs that public schooling is undermined, undervalued and degraded as a consequence of the 'dictatorship of the market place' (Meier, 1995) and the reductions in government spending on public schooling following the ascendancy of neo-liberal governments. Is it possible to contest these developments? Can schools sustain a commitment to social justice in spite of its evacuation from official policy? This paper draws on a recently completed critical ethnographic study to present an argument for a reconfigured commitment to social justice in, and through, public schooling. Such a commitment, it is argued, needs to incorporate whole school responses to the classed nature of society and inequalities arising from the political economy but must also be attentive to the claims to recognition of groups who have been marginalised or excluded in traditional schooling arrangements as a result of various forms of cultural oppression. Whilst outlining the importance of locally conceived responses to educational disadvantage, the paper warns against the dangers of 'romantic localism' (Troyna & Vincent, 1995) and highlights the need for collective commitment and political action across the public education system, teacher unions, teacher education centres and community groups.

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?
In this paper I report 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). The paper is divided into three parts. Firstly, I describe the political context of the research issue and present a brief description of the school site and the methodological features of the study. Secondly, I discuss the cultural, structural and pedagogical aspects of school-based reform for social justice at Wattle Plains and outline some of the ambiguities that accompany those engaged in such a project. Thirdly, I move beyond the perimeters of the school to consider how a commitment to social justice might be reconfigured in the public education system.

Section One: The political context

There are thirty children in my class and poverty is a real issue. There are six or seven families especially affected by unemployment and they're literally struggling to find out where the next dollar is coming from. (Teacher 3#)

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 just confined to material inequalities. At the turn 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. As the recent election campaign and its aftermath has shown, 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, 1990). 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.

'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 (1999) 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.

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. 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) have 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.

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. In spite of these obstacles 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: the social and cultural context

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 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 purposeful conversations (Burgess, 1988) with a group of about ten informants. But 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 (Anderson, 1989; Angus, 1986;
Smyth, 1994). 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 reform social justice?
- What are the struggles and tensions associated with this commitment?

In what follows I want to look at the major features of the whole school reform agenda for social justice at Wattle Plains.

Section Two: Sustaining school reform for social justice

We’re not scared to take a stand for the rights of children at school and the families of the school . . . I don’t believe that schools can be politically or socially neutral; you can’t because then you’re doing an injustice to your children in the school. (Teacher 2#)

'You can’t be neutral'

There is a view in some quarters that teachers no longer have any real autonomy; that their work has become degraded and proletarianised as a consequence of a decade of managerialism and market-driven educational reforms; and, that there are few spaces for teachers to contest mandated policies or to ‘teach against the grain’ (Cochran-Smith, 1991). This mood of despair did not prevail at Wattle Plains. On the contrary, there was a sense of collective agency and a widely shared conviction that education was indeed a referent for change; that teachers could challenge educational inequalities and contest inequitable power arrangements; and, that they could develop socially just curriculum in concert with the community. A 'language of possibility' and spirit of optimism were apparent in school planning processes and the forums where teachers discussed and debated the 'big issues' of their work. It was enhanced through a shared vision about what was needed to improve learning for Aboriginal students, those in poverty and students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Central to this vision was the notion of power sharing and the importance of developing democratic relationships; negotiating curriculum with the culturally diverse groups in the school community; and, promoting educative school/community dialogues and relationships. A teacher explained this philosophy 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 in society or do you want to exclude the people that don’t fit your notion of the world? (Teacher #1)

Structural, cultural and pedagogical change

Most significantly, attempts to promote socially just relationships involved a recognition of the need for whole school reform. Although there is nothing particularly novel about the idea of grassroots reform (Connell, 1993; Fullan, 1992; Goodman, Baron & Myers, 1999) the practical and political strategies required to achieve such change often remain rather
elusive. At Wattle Plains there was broad consensus that a concern for social justice should underpin the curriculum and remain an ongoing feature of school planning processes. What this involved in practice was the development of an interrelated set of structural, cultural and pedagogical arrangements (Harradine, 1996; Ladwig, Currie, & Chadbourne, 1994) to support the development of socially just curriculum, as depicted in the following diagram.

Structural change at Wattle Plains enhanced the development of collaborative relationships, democratic decision-making processes and leadership practices that were strongly focused on social justice and student learning. In conjunction with these structural processes, cultural change fostered distributive and educative forms of leadership, success-oriented learning and a culture of debate about teaching and learning that supported the school's social justice ethos. In such a culture, change for its own sake was considered unproductive or unenlightened unless it could be shown that it would benefit the education of students. Most significantly, pedagogical change involved the development of curriculum and teaching practices that addressed the educational needs and aspirations of a heterogeneous school community. In particular, the arts became a vehicle for whole school reform that gave students a voice, incorporated critical literacies and multicultural perspectives into classroom practices, and enhanced the aesthetic or affective domains of learning. Underpinning all of this was an emphasis on explicit teaching practices and success-oriented learning. I was told that:
success–oriented learning is the barometer of a school's commitment to social justice. If a school is addressing social justice, you'll see children successful. (Teacher 1#)

In pursuing a social justice vision, the school managed to maintain an internally persuasive discourse and, in spite of the many ambiguities and tensions, did not allow outsiders to derail its agenda. Although external reforms were not rejected out of hand they were generally greeted with questions like: How might this initiative support what we are doing? Will it improve students' learning? Often the school's engagement with system priorities involved some appropriation of ideas and resources to support school-based reforms and it occasionally involved attempts to marginalise or sideline the most undesirable or oppressive features of mandated changes. Resistance of this kind was not overtly oppositional in nature and clearly the school was not on a collision course with the department—indeed, it was often held up by the department as a progressive school. What seems especially pertinent in this context is that the school culture at Wattle Plains promoted a belief in the possibility of a socially just schooling that ensured that teachers moved beyond negative carping of current arrangements to the development of strategies to bring about emancipatory changes. It was reinforced by educative and distributive forms of leadership that helped to keep alive a culture of debate about teaching and learning. It was explained to me that:

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 places is about learning rather than getting a smack for being wrong. (Teacher 2#)

School reform for social justice at Wattle Plains was enacted in concert with the school community, and parents, students and staff were all involved in making authentic decisions about the curriculum. Shor and Freire (1987a) argue that democratic schools promote dialogic relationships and in the case of Wattle Plains it was clear that the curriculum tapped into the 'present, existential, concrete situations' of students in order to integrate personal and local concerns with broader social issues (Freire, 1972, p. 68). The sense of the school being part of the community was evident in Grandparents Day, school concerts and plays, sporting events and multicultural festivals. In a very real sense the community had ownership of the vision for social justice.

It is difficult to see how schools can sustain grassroots reform without access to new ideas and resources. As I have illustrated in this study, teachers at Wattle Plains were involved in numerous research projects with the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) and university partners and, as a consequence, new ideas were constantly circulating through the school. Not only did these projects promote a research culture in the school but they also ensured that various groups had sources of income to develop their own curriculum initiatives in the arts, literacy and science. Unfortunately, many of these funding sources have dried up in the current educational climate and Wattle Plains, in common with other schools, has had to rely much more extensively on its own resources. Just as the school mined ideas from other sources, it also played a significant role in disseminating ideas and practices to other schools and educational institutions. This was not just a form of school promotion but represented an effort to establish educational networks with other schools and advance the well-being of public schooling across the community.

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. Although there was a recognition on the part of my informants that the school had taken significant steps towards the realisation of socially just
schooling, it was tempered with an understanding of the immensity of the task and the numerous impediments to grassroots reform in the current political environment. Not the least of these involved the ambiguities and tensions associated with the school's participation in the Basic Skills Tests, the difficulties of keeping the education of girls on the agenda, the barriers to the development of critical literacies and the marketisation pressures on schooling. Hence, it could be argued that although the school had become a collaborative learning community that was deeply committed to socially just curriculum it was struggling to sustain the necessary level of critical reflection to nurture a more critical culture.

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. (Teacher 1#)

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, 1993) and Australia (Blackmore, 1998; Smyth, 1993) 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?

I believe that there are many teachers and school communities working to sustain socially just curricula but they do so in a political context where many of the ideals that they espouse are at variance with the current education reform agenda. In spite of the necessity of locally conceived responses to social injustices (Griffiths, 1998a; 1998b) there are limits to what individual school communities can achieve when it comes to transforming the structural forces which sustain oppressive practices in the first place. In other words, we have to guard
against ‘naive optimism’ (Shor & Freire, 1987b) p. 130) in asserting the liberating potential of grassroots reform. Ultimately, what is required is a reconfigured commitment to social justice within the public education system, institutions of government and society at large. This is an issue I tackle in the remaining section of this paper.

Section Three: Reconfiguring schooling—beyond school boundaries

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 to exacerbate inequalities amongst schools thus undermining the notion of a public education system.

In reality, the task of reconfiguring socially just schooling requires a much broader application of critical social theory in the realm of public policy and community action. What might this task involve? According to Benhabib (1986), a truly empowering critical social theory consists of the interconnecting moments of critique, norm and utopia. To be of practical and emancipatory value it must do more than assist in understanding the human condition; it must also offer some vision of an alternative to the present arrangements. Such thinking corresponds closely with Lather's (1986) notion of ‘research as praxis’—research that is openly committed to critiquing the status quo yet also directed towards building a better world (Carlson & Apple, 1998). In the educational context, Carlson and Apple (1998, p. 30) argue that critical educators and researchers need to become more engaged ‘not only critiquing existing discourses and practices in schools but in the formulation of democratic and progressive visions of what could be’.

I want to take up this challenge and engage in some reimagining of public schooling in presenting a broad set of strategies to guide the development of a revitalised commitment to social justice by governments and educational institutions. In setting out this task I want to draw on Stilwell’s (2000) analysis of what is required to establish a coherent political and economic alternative to neo-liberalism, namely, a critique of the existing situation, a vision of the alternative and the strategies and resources for getting from the present to the preferred future.

‘Speaking out’: a critique of the existing situation

When Martin Luther nailed a paper of Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg in 1517 he set in place a chain of events that rocked the very foundations of the Catholic Church. Although the letter appeared to be largely an attack on the practice of selling indulgences—documents offering commutation of penance for money payments—it pointed to a deeper unrest about the level of corruption within the Church and the lack of spiritual direction from the Papacy (Green, 1969) Luther was not alone in condemning abuses in the Church but, unlike Erasmus and some other critics, he chose to speak out in German, the language of the common people, instead of Latin, the medium of the Church and the scholastic community. By going public, rather than debating the issues with clerics in some ecclesiastical enclave, Luther ensured that his views would not be quarantined from the people. Furthermore, by taking full advantage of the newly invented printing press, he was able to disseminate his ideas throughout his native land and ultimately to many parts of Europe.
Luther's courageous stand could well serve as a reminder to the defenders of public education about the need to speak out plainly and forcefully against the penury and dereliction of public schooling that has accompanied the ascendancy of neo-liberal governance. Just as Luther was prepared to publicly expose the sale of indulgences as a corruption of the teachings of Jesus which undermined the moral authority of the Church, we need to name the inequities and gross injustices of the current education reform agenda. Like Luther, we need to shift the critique of public policy beyond academic circles into the public domain; we need to find ways of tapping into the consciousness of the community through popular culture and the press.

To begin with, we need to ring alarm bells about the economic and social consequences of a deepening divide in Australian society that has led to an increasingly fragmented nation. Citing data from the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) at the University of Canberra, Gilbert (2000, p. 43) points out that the cost to the nation of early school leaving is somewhere in the vicinity of $2.6 billion a year whilst the existence of a pool of 300 000 unemployed young adults in 1999 represents an enormous wastage of intellectual resources that might be directed towards the betterment of society. It is a national disgrace that an affluent country such as Australia spends such a small proportion of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on public education yet is able to provide tax breaks for its wealthiest citizens.

Since the problems confronting schools 'are rooted in the global conditions of society' (Shor & Freire, 1987b, p. 128), our analysis must concentrate not just on the local situation but on the capitalist system and its relationship with schooling. On the one hand, schools are caught up in the community despair that invariably flows from economic restructuring and regional unemployment but, as a result of vocationally driven curricula and marketised approaches to education, they are also implicated in the reproduction of exploitative capitalist arrangements that lead to such misery and despair in the first place. Macedo (1994) asserts that the national educational reform agenda in the United States has continued to ignore the oppressive realities of poverty for many students. Similarly in Australia, conservative policy-makers have gone to great lengths to avoid class realities in talking of 'students at risk' and 'disadvantaged groups'.

At a time when there has been a tendency to shift the focus of social injustice away from material inequalities towards cultural recognition we need to reaffirm the debilitating effects of poverty on educational outcomes for many students in public schools (Connell, 1994; Levin, 1995). This is especially so in working-class communities like Wattle Plains where a regional decline in manufacturing industries described by Peel (1995) and Spoehr (1999) has resulted in lower household incomes and an increasing reliance on social welfare. Whatever the merits of the approaches to social justice informed by identity politics and theories of cultural recognition, the political economy needs to be retained as a major explanation of economic inequality (Apple, 1996; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Zizek, 1998). In fact, Zizek (1998, p. 164) asserts that such a position is necessary for feminists, gays, ecologists and those concerned with ethnic and minority rights 'precisely in order to create the conditions for the more effective realisation of their demands'.

We also need to be clear about the current national education agenda and view it for what it is—an attack on egalitarianism and a calculated attempt to undermine confidence in the public education system. With the moves towards a marketised model of education there is a real danger that public education will become a 'safety net' provision for those who can't afford to send their children to private schools (Reid, 1997). Rather than enhancing the diversity of education, moves towards market-driven models of local school management are likely to result in greater conformity and compliance with utilitarian views of education. The real beneficiaries of this competitive, individualistic approach are likely to be those...
students whose parents possess the power, money and social capital to exercise real choice in schooling. A critique of the educational reform program also needs to expose the inequitable nature of Commonwealth funding arrangements which has seen a massive shift of money to elite, well-endowed private schools; the thinly veiled attempt to control teachers' work through standardised testing regimes and hierarchically driven performance management processes; and, the folly of local school management schemes which position schools as stand-alone entities competing for a market share in an uneven playing field (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000).

Although it is imperative that educators articulate their concerns about contemporary educational reforms in a compelling and forceful manner, such a critique needs to be accompanied by a language of possibility, or a courageous vision, so far as alternative pathways are concerned. As Williams (1989) reminds us, making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, is a necessary disposition in order to project a sense of optimism and belief in the liberatory potential of education. In this context my recently completed ethnographic study of school reform at Wattle Plains offers some real encouragement for those engaged in grassroots reform for social justice.

Reimagining schooling: a vision of the alternative

Broadly speaking, reimagining schooling today means being able to articulate a socially just and democratic alternative to market-driven, utilitarian approaches to public schooling (Connell, 1998; Gilbert, 2000; Kemmis, 1994; Smyth, Hattam, & Lawson, 1998). Such a vision has been variously expressed as 'democratic schools' (Apple & Beane, 1995), 'socially just schools' (Hattam, 1996; Kemmis, 1994), 'socially critical schools' (Smyth, 1993), 'dialogic education' (Shor, 1992), 'schooling for critical democracy' (Goodman, 1992) and 'critical multicultural education'. While differing in points of emphasis, each of these models offers a radical alternative to current approaches which are largely intent on preserving the status quo or, at best, seeking to modify practices by tinkering around the margins of a hegemonic curriculum.

In reimagining current arrangements it might be tempting to revisit the past to recapture the spirit of the Disadvantaged Schools Program, but as Connell (1998) explains, pursuing an alternative to present reform agenda requires more than a resurrection of the notions of redistributive justice. Although a revitalised vision for socially just schooling will need to incorporate responses to the classed nature of society and inequalities arising from the political economy, it must also be attentive to a politics of identity and the claims to recognition of those cultural groups who have been marginalised or excluded in traditional schooling as a result of oppressive social relations stemming from the racist, patriarchal and homophobic nature of society. In effect, it means taking account of new and emerging social movements and the politics of difference operating around intersecting and complex categories of poverty, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and disability. But it also means exercising some critical judgement about the claims to recognition and special attention of right-wing groups whose beliefs and values might be construed as a threat to the workings of a democratic and multicultural society.

What might be contained in such a vision? In many ways, this is an issue that needs to be worked out by school communities rather than distant policy-makers or education 'experts' but a number of recent studies offer useful insights into the principles or values which might guide such a project. Amongst these, Gale and Densmore (2000) propose a framework for principled action emphasising the democratisation of relationships within and outside the classroom. However, they argue for a broader concept of representative democracy than that currently practised in Western societies—a democracy which is much more attuned to recognitive justice and the rights of the most disadvantaged groups in the community.
Kemmis (1994) draws on Iris Young's (1990) categories of oppression and domination in outlining a set of touchstones of socially just curriculum as a basis for the implementation of strategies in the realm of curriculum, educational administration, teacher education and research. But beyond the question of differences, Singh (1998) calls for an ongoing debate about the extent of shared values in Australian society and advocates a dialogic and multicultural education which 'seeks to build bridges that connect the concerns of one group of Australians with those of another, and seeks to build points of commonality among different groups of people.' (p. 66).

In Schooling for a Fair Go, Smyth, Hattam and Lawson (1998) offer a guide to prospective parents in what to look for in a neighbourhood school. Amongst other commitments, they suggest that parents should seek evidence that the school advances a concern for social justice; enacts democratic practices; has a culture of innovation with a focus on student learning; and, a curriculum which promotes critical literacies yet is responsive to the cultural and economic context of the community.

**A language of possibility: strategic action**

A courageous vision may be a necessary element in reconfiguring a commitment to socially just schooling but its realisation also demands the selection of appropriate strategies and resources. At Wattle Plains grassroots reform involved a whole school approach which addressed in a holistic way the structural, cultural and pedagogical elements of schooling for social justice. In this study I concluded that there are spaces for school communities and teachers to contest some of the more repressive elements of the current neo-liberal discourse but in reality the complexity of the task demands that political action extends well beyond the immediate school community to encompass regional networks, professional associations, teacher unions and community groups. The need for such a collective response becomes apparent when we consider the damaging consequences of marketisation and the inequitable outcomes of the current drive towards local school management where schools are increasingly being viewed as stand-alone entities competing for a share of students in a free market economy.

As I contemplate these threats to public education I am reminded of the somewhat Eurocentric and sexist (but, nonetheless, immortal words) of the English poet, John Donne, as he reflected on the interconnectedness of humanity and the notion of what it means be part of society as distinct to having an individual existence:

> 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]

Just as the death of another human being diminishes me in some way, so too does the demise or closure of a struggling school community diminish the public education system. 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 education nurturing the formation of a socially just society hinges on the existence of a well-resourced and vibrant public education system, local action needs to be combined with collective political action involving the whole of the public school sector, education unions and community coalitions.

Although it may well be wishful thinking in the current political environment, it is imperative that educators and school communities pressure governments of all political persuasions to reinsert social justice principles into all aspects of policy-making so that all departments are required to consider the impact of decisions on the social and economic well-being of the community, especially the most marginalised members. From a management perspective, this necessitates a revitalised Social Justice Action Plan and specific objectives for improving access, participation and educational outcomes for marginalised and disenfranchised groups (Lingard, 1994) However, such outcomes are impossible without an adequately funded public education system and a reinvigorated curriculum directorate that is more focused on teaching and learning than the development of accountability frameworks.

There is also an urgent need to open up the spaces for debate within the education system; to encourage the growth of authentic partnerships and educative dialogues between schools and the broader community; and, for education departments to work with schools in the development of curriculum resources that support social justice goals. The case has been put for the notion of a socially just school (Smyth, 1993) but we have yet to really tangle with the complementary notion of a socially just educational centre. Finally, in view of the significance of teachers' learning, there is a need to resource school reform networks that promote critically reflective practices rather than the delivery of technically driven mandated training and development programs.

Education unions, by virtue of their industrial brief and membership size, have a major part to play in coordinating the defence of public education; working to re-establish more democratic relationships within the education system; sponsoring teacher development and school reform networks that focus on social justice as a central curriculum concern; and, seeking to re-establish productive involvement in policy development at the state and federal level (Reid, 1998). There is no doubt that teacher education unions have played an important role in contesting the logic of standardised testing regimes and market-driven models of school management but, as Reid (1998) maintains, the curriculum itself needs to become an industrial issue.

Teachers in schools are ultimately responsible for establishing socially just relationships and enacting curriculum that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of students in their classrooms. A major element in school reform at Wattle Plains has revolved around the practices which enhance teachers' learning about the strategies to tackle poverty and other structured inequalities. Such practices highlight the need for more widespread and systemic support for teachers' learning about social justice in teacher education courses, school induction programs and the ongoing professional development of teachers. Macedo (1994) argues that schools of education can play a major role in changing technicist constructions of teaching through the promotion of critically reflective practices rather than an emphasis on competency frameworks and technical skills.

If prospective and practising educators are to play a more transformative role in contesting inequitable schooling arrangements, they need to develop a knowledge and understanding of the moral and political purposes of education, the social context of schooling, the relationships between social class, 'race' and gender in the production of educational disadvantage (Lingard, 1994). These issues, along with programs focusing on the needs and aspirations of indigenous Australians and strategies to promote the development of critical literacies, should be placed at the centre of teacher education programs rather than
consigned to the periphery or (as sometimes occurs) offered as elective topics in undergraduate courses.

Other educational institutions can also contribute to this goal. Speaking at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference (AARE) in Sydney, Kemmis (2000) called for a greater degree of integration between university educational researchers and practitioners in schools as a means of enhancing critically reflective practices and school-based research. This kind of research is now happening in many states. The Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (FIST), where I am currently employed, has conducted collaborative research into school reform and teachers' work with DETE, state schools and other educational institutions. A major outcome of these projects has been the publication of case studies on school reform for social justice. [See for example, McInerney, Hattam, Smyth and Lawson (1999) *Making socially just curriculum* and other resources in the Teachers Learning Project *Investigation Series*. Similarly, professional associations, such as the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) have taken a leading role in sponsoring discussions about educational reform and innovative curriculum, especially in the areas of middle schooling. These and other research institutes, such as the Centre for the Study of Public Education at the University of South Australia, have an important role to play in defending and promoting public education and the development of socially just curriculum.

Outside specific educational institutions it is essential that those seeking to establish more socially just schooling tap into community groups working for progressive social, political and cultural change (Ginsberg & Kamat, 1997). Schools alone cannot contest racism, sexism and homophobic culture nor can they transform the structural factors which have produced such a maldistribution of wealth in the first place. However, teachers can challenge and expose such inequalities, for as Shor and Freire (1987b) point out:

> one force of the classroom can be its interfering with the consciousness needed to support exploitation and inequality. (p. 175)

Because education cannot be regarded as 'the lever for the transformation of society', (Shor & Freire, 1987b, p. 130), the struggle for more socially just schooling needs to extend beyond the classroom to the wider society. By forging links with youth organisations, human rights groups, welfare organisations and community action groups, progressive educators and school communities are more likely to be able to develop the necessary political clout to combat injustices at the local and regional level. Such a stance requires some radical rethinking of teachers' work and conventional school/community relationships—especially those which are commonly promoted in the marketised version of schooling. Conceived of in this way, school/community partnerships might extend the links beyond vocationalism and the world of work to an alliance working for more socially just outcomes in schooling—a necessary strategy in tackling the numerous and complex social, environmental and economic issues that are not contained within the perimeters of the school.

Conclusions

In spite of the coercive nature of external reforms, hegemony is never complete. I believe that the experience at Wattle Plains shows that it is still possible for teachers and school communities to exercise a degree of autonomy in pursuing grassroots reform for social justice. It suggests to me that when schools develop a courageous educational vision in concert with the community; when they create the spaces to sustain a culture of debate about teaching and learning, and, where distributive and educative forms of leadership prevail, there is a real possibility of enacting socially just curriculum—even when the very notion has been evacuated from official policy. This is not to deny the tensions and ambiguities confronting schools as they attempt to rail against the worst excesses of a
managerial discourse, nor is it to diminish the necessity for political action beyond the perimeters of the local school. It is, however, to affirm that teaching is a moral, intellectual and political activity; that teachers can work in transformative ways to challenge the injustices that surround them; and, that a school that is prepared to cling tenaciously to ethical principles and a commitment to social justice can make a difference for students.

Perhaps the notion of a socially just school will always remain a utopian vision—an ideal to be struggled for, rather than an achievable goal. But, as Freire has argued so passionately, history is never foreclosed; the future is not written large in the sky; human agency does exist and alternative pathways are possible. Schooling, for all its flaws, still offers the greatest hope for changing the hearts and minds of Australians as we seek to advance reconciliation with indigenous peoples and foster the development of a truly compassionate and socially just society.
References


