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Reflections from the Riot Zone: The Fair Go Project and Student Engagement in a Besieged Community

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The “Riot Zone”

In early 2005 a police chase in the Macquarie Fields area of Sydney resulted in the death of a young man. The aftermath was a lot of community unrest, especially among the youth of the area. There were confrontations between these youth and large numbers of police brought in to “control” the mob. The unrest lasted for a week and the media spotlight was intense. Helicopters flew over the community 24 hours of this week.

Well last week I was scared. When it was home time I was scared to walk home by myself because I always walk by myself. I couldn't sleep because of the helicopters and I was scared to even sleep in my own room. I always slept in the lounge room with my brother, mum and dad. I couldn't sleep until the helicopters went. Since riots have been happening I couldn't sleep properly but now I can. I am glad that I think it is over. I hope it ends soon (Year 6 student writing in a reflective journal).

Much of the media attention attempted to blame families for its social disadvantage. The media attention was reinforced by politicians who publicly stated that the indirect blame on these community troubles should fall on parents, saying that poor values taught at home were responsible for growing lawlessness in this area of Sydney.

The School in the Community: Making a Real Difference

It would not be difficult to imagine that in the midst of these difficulties the local school would suffer a backlash. After all, it too is part of “the system”. Most of the people living in this community have not been advantaged through education. They find themselves in this entry-level public housing estate because of their economic and social needs. Single parents, many of whom are female, head most of these families. The wider region has high levels of unemployment with youth unemployment a particular problem. Infrastructure such as public transport and community services have been historically lacking in comparison with more affluent areas. It seems an area, fertile for resistance.

They're bigger than us, they stand for a bigger establishment than we do, like we're just little and they stand for bigger things, and you try to get your own back (Willis, 1977:11).

The school did not suffer a community backlash during the “riots”. There was no residual anger directed against it, no damage, no graffiti. In the middle of this intense spotlight, this school that has a different and supportive view of the people who live around it, and is attempting to make a real difference in the education of its students. Working within theoretical frames developed in the Fair Go Project, teachers and university researchers are implementing classroom changes aimed at delivering powerful engaging messages.

The School and Classroom Context

Curran Primary School has 300 students, mostly Australians of Anglo, Indigenous or Pacific Island backgrounds. The school is familiar with the emotional, social and financial stresses associated with socio-economic disadvantage and are also faced with the challenges of high student mobility, negative media attention and with systemic and classroom pressure to improve student outcomes to levels comparable to their more advantaged peers. It has a significant number of beginning teachers.

The research that this paper is reporting has been in a senior primary (5th/6th) class. Students are of mixed ability. Many of these students have a school history of disengagement played out in truancy, defiance, running around the school, “being out of control”. Their teacher has a long-term commitment to working with these students and has a reputation for developing strong relationships with “at-risk” students. She is a teacher prepared to make pedagogical changes in order more effectively to teach her students, and has experience working with the concepts of the Fair Go Project.

The Fair Go Project

The Fair Go Project is research into student engagement among low SES students in primary schools in Sydney’s South West. This study is a joint undertaking between a team of researchers from the University of Western Sydney (School of Education) and the Priority Schools Funding Program¹ (NSW Department of Education and Training). An action research project employing a co-researching ethnographic methodology, the study brings together university researchers, educational consultants, school-teachers and community members.

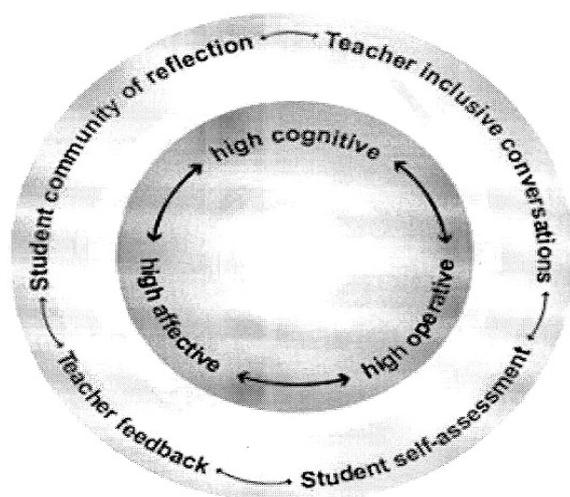
The Fair Go Project has developed a framework around student engagement drawing on ideas from within the sociology of pedagogy. In summary, this framework:

- o Describes 2 levels of student engagement – small ‘e’ engagement (*e’ngagement*) and big ‘E’ engagement (*E’ngagement*)
- o Defines ‘e’ngagement is a substantive engagement in classroom processes and experiences characterised as a multidimensional construct – high cognitive, high affective, high operative (drawing on Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).
- o Defines ‘E’ngagement is the longer more enduring relationship with school as a place and education as a resource - “school is for me”
- o Conceptualises these 2 levels as embedded within each other and this embeddedness is captured in the phrase “the future in the present” - this sees classrooms as places that can become critical sites where the immediate educational experiences build to a future-oriented consciousness that sees education as a resource to be profitably employed within students’ lives.
- o Sees this process influenced by classroom messages across “discourses of power” – knowledge, ability, control, place and voice (utilising theory from Bernstein, 1996).
- o Argues that these messages are carried by the nature of the pedagogy and the classroom processes.
- o Has a pedagogy aimed to be high cognitive, high affective and high operative and classroom processes aimed to make students “insiders” in their classroom learning communities.

The Fair Go Pedagogy can be depicted as follows (Figure 1):

¹ The Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) is a program aimed at improving educational outcomes for students living in the poorest communities in NSW.

Figure 1 – The Fair Go Project Classroom Pedagogy



For a more detailed description of the Fair Go theoretical framework and pedagogy see Munns (2004) and Fair Go Team (in press).

The research conducted in 2005 in the senior class at Curran School focussed on implementing these classroom changes with a particular focus on teacher and student scaffolding and student self-assessment. Data was collected through:

- o Classroom observations
- o interviews with students and teachers
- o student reflections in learning journals
- o attendance and behavioural statistics
- o student engagement survey (under development).

Pedagogy that Builds Community – “School Is For Us”

One of the important parts of the classroom teacher’s pedagogy was the building of a sense of community among the students. She used student reflection as a significant aspect of this process. During the year when the students were studying a mandatory Human Society and Its Environment (Social Studies) topic on government, they were invited to take part in a project to make the school a better place for other students, teachers and the community. They decided as a group to improve teaching and learning across the school: a collaborative research project called “School Is For Us”. The teachers and the students worked together to develop their capacities as members of a research team. This involved them in a number of roles.

Children as data collectors

- o they gained permission to conduct the research by writing letters to Principal and teachers
- o they collected data through classroom observations (including the use of still and video photography) and interviews with students & teachers
- o they were given researcher passes that gave them access classrooms & school areas

Children as decision-makers

- o they decided which class and which teacher’s practices they would research
- o they wrote their own interview questions
- o they developed their own time frames and schedules, a process facilitated by their researcher passes

Children as data analysts

- o they were taught how to analyse data, looking for common themes in observations & interviews

- o they shared these themes across the whole class
- Children as reflective researchers*
- o they reflected on their learning using the REAL framework (Munns & Woodward, under review)
 - o they shared their ideas as a learning community
 - o they wrote reflective journals
 - o they produced PowerPoint presentations for the Principal and staff

The learning experiences in the “School Is For Us” project worked strongly within the Fair Go framework (see Figure 1).

- o The pedagogies were
 - o high cognitive – the students were involved in the use of self-regulated learning strategies that promoted deep understanding and expertise
 - o high affective – the students deeply valued what they were doing
 - o high operative – the students were actively participating at the same time as their skills as learners were developing
- o The learning community developed through student self-assessment, a community of reflection, teacher inclusive conversations and teacher feedback.

Furthermore, data gathered during this time pointed to the students’ receiving engaging messages.

Engaging Messages

The Fair Go Project proposes that the following are the key engaging messages that students might receive within the “discourses of power” (Table 1). To recapitulate, it is these messages that provide the connections between 'e'ngagement and 'E'ngagement.

Table 1 – Discourses of Power and Engaging Messages for Low SES Students

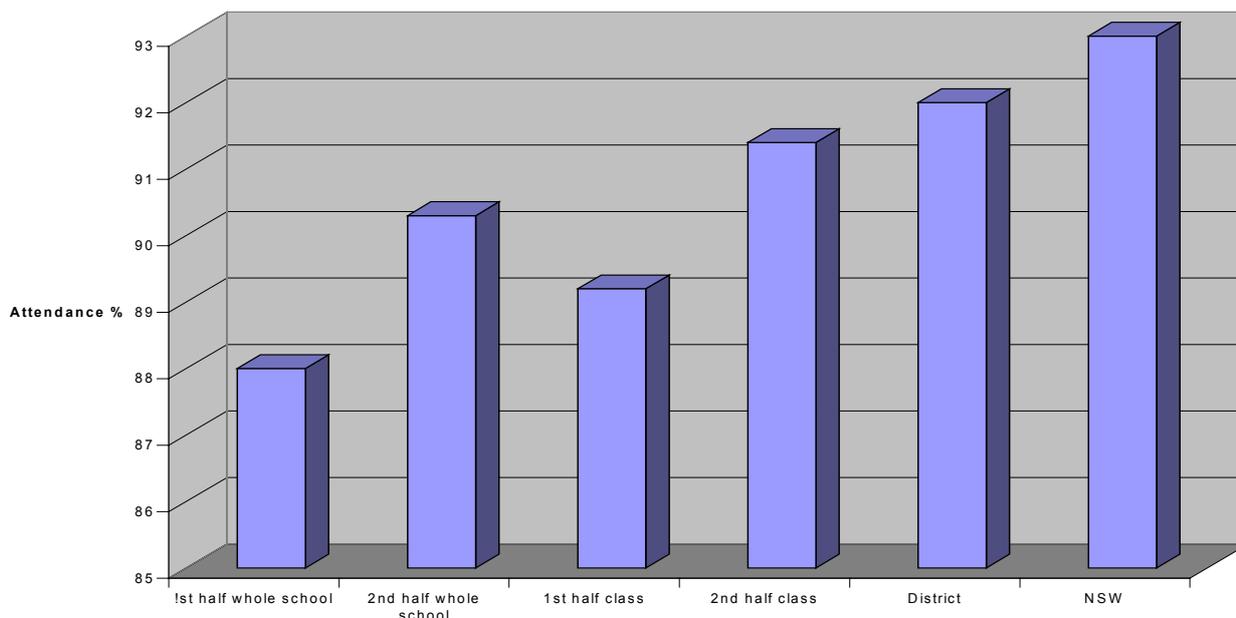
knowledge	“We can see the connection and the meaning” – reflectively constructed access to contextualised and powerful knowledge
ability	“I am capable” – feelings of being able to achieve and a spiral of high expectations and aspirations
control	“We do this together” – sharing of classroom time and space: interdependence, mutuality and power with
place	“It’s great to be a kid from” – valued as individual and learner and feelings of belonging and ownership over learning
voice	“We share” – environment of discussion and reflection about learning with students and teachers playing reciprocal meaningful roles

What follows are some data that point to how the changes made in the classroom have moved students towards more engaging relationships with their classroom, school and education.

Attendance Data

The following graph shows the attendance patterns for the class against attendance for the rest of the school

Figure 2 – Attendance Data



Individual Student Case Studies

Below are some stories taken from research observation notes describing changes to students' levels of engagement over the year.

John

Couldn't and wouldn't write at the beginning of the year. He was surly and aggressive. He now writes and his text is coherent and spelling is recognisable - not just a series of consonants which it was at the beginning of the year. He still gets frustrated working in a group as he cannot read and contribute as much as he wants to. He has a quick mind and is praised for his efforts. This year is the first year any of his work has been put up in the classroom. Occasionally he still gets annoyed with himself and scrawls over his work because he doesn't think it is any good. But mostly he smiles and tries hard.

Chris

His family moved house mid way through 3rd term to Campbelltown. He refused to go to his new school for 4 days and returned to Curran PS, catching the bus everyday to attend.

Sally

Is one of the best students in the class and prefect of the school. Her work and attitude have always been positive. However she has shown greater initiative with her work, she actively seeks to add to her group's understandings and presentation by doing work at home and making innovative suggestions.

John

Is a 'potential' trouble maker in class, quite a stirrer of others. However, he has been given guidelines that have assisted him to attend to his work. Praise and continued support for his ideas have made him a very

diligent and hard worker – he wants to keep up with the ‘good students’ in the class and demonstrate that he too has ability. Recently he took on the PowerPoint presentation, collation of data for his group as the rest were away. He ploughed through the storyboard creating almost all the slides – with background changes, word art titles and information on most of them. He really worked hard.

Susie

Was previously a recurrent behaviour problem in the class. She has a history of running out of class and being sent out of class. Her work is exceptional – a high standard and she clearly is very intelligent. However she used to refuse to acknowledge her ability, preferring to hide behind the “bad girl” image. Over the year her behaviour has settled down - she does not refuse us permission to copy or look at her work now. She actively seeks assistance and requests. Now she accepts feedback on her work and is not deriding her own work.

Student Learning Journals

Following are some extracts from student learning journals showing their developing views about their learning. Note the last entry from Susie described in the previous section.

“I felt like I was getting smarter just by learning a new thing”

“I learnt that my work is not just about fun, it’s about how you do it and how you are proud of it. When I finished it I was happy and excited about it and I learned that my work is all about being creative and designing the work that you do and feeling good about it”

“I chose this work because I’m proud of it ... I now know that I can accomplish more things than I thought. I think I am more confident than I was before ... I can write more than I ever thought ...” (from Susie’s Reflective Journal)

Student Interviews

The interviews had a particular focus on the role that student self-assessment played in the engagement processes.

We get to do self-assessment and we get to say how we feel about the work. And she [teacher] reads it and tries to make improvements in what she teaches us, and she tries to make it as fun as possible. She listens to the whole class and she just wants everyone to enjoy what she’s teaching and be able to learn it.

Tell me about opportunities for reflection in your class.

Well self-assessment. We write down what we’ve been learning and if we liked it and why we liked it. And if we needed some more help to do it. How to overcome barriers.

And has that been useful for you?

Yeah it makes you think more about what you’re doing, it makes you think more about what you’re learning. And how you understand it.

Does it make you feel different about school?

Yeah because without school and without learning you can’t get forward. If you don’t learn you won’t go nowhere. But if you think and talk about learning more it will make you keep going. And the more you can keep going the more you achieve. I’ve learnt this year ... to keep going and just take the risk. Never give up.

Conclusion – “School is For Me”

The research from this classroom is showing that even in the most educationally disadvantaged communities students might come to believe that “school is for me”, and so have a chance that education can become a positive and productive resource in their current and future lives.

Everyone thinks Curran is a bad place because it’s in Macquarie Fields, but Curran is better because you have more learning opportunities and you’ve got more chances of success. Our school kids want to show that Curran is not that bad (student interview).

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