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**Making social justice *curricular*:  
Exploring ambivalences within teacher professional identity**

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on interviews with eight teachers, all co-researchers (with a University of South Australia team) in an Australian Research Council-funded project with the working title *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN)*. We investigate the tense identity dynamics, involving ambivalences and emotional labours, among these teachers who express career commitments to serve students of a ‘severely disadvantaged’ region by providing ‘socially just’ school experiences and outcomes.

Our analysis of interview testimony shows how these teachers strive to see their students as embodying cultural ‘assets’ (rather than ‘deficits’) for learning. At the same time, in facing the formidable difficulties of ‘teaching against the grain’ – of working with learners who do not embody institutionally privileged cultural capital – they express ambivalences about pursuing academic achievement through rigorous curricular work, even along alternative lines – designing curriculum units that make cultural connection with students’ lifeworld ‘funds of knowledge’ – that the *RPiN* project promotes. The data suggests that these teachers feel need to protect themselves, as well as their students, from pains of ‘over-reaching’ for ‘unattainable’ goals. This leads to professional identity struggles over how to see their students as ‘educable’, what constitutes learning ‘success’, and what ‘social justice’ can mean in ‘disadvantaged schools’.

**Introduction: The challenges of teaching ‘against the grain’**

It is no secret that many teachers prefer working with students from materially and culturally elite families. This is hardly surprising if we appreciate how the ‘three message systems’ (Bernstein 1975) of mainstream schooling – knowledge content and organisation (curriculum); modes of communicative transaction (pedagogy); and methods of evaluation (assessment) – are coded to select for power-elite cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). It is thus easier to oversee the academic ‘success’ of students born into ‘cultures of power’, as against ‘other people’s children’ (Delpit 1995) – i.e. those from less powerfully positioned families in the social structure.

Despite commonsense notions that schools make significant efforts to teach students how to perform according to the ‘standards’ they assess, this is actually rare. Typically, the codes for ‘good’ academic performance are kept implicit rather than made explicit and learnable through pedagogies that scaffold (Delpit 1995). Students who perform ‘well’ are thus those who, through immersion in early life contexts *prior to schooling*, acquire – at a level of subconsciously embodied dispositions, or habitus (Bourdieu 1977) – the cultural capital needed for academic ‘success’. Such students do not need schooling to gain prowess in the codes they perform so well in school; whereas ‘other people’s children’ *do* need to learn these codes *in school*.

That schools rarely teach such codes is not because viable pedagogic approaches are lacking. There are illustrative cases in which ‘other people’s children’ do learn the codes for academic success, scaffolded to curricula that also value and sustain home/community cultural identity (Wigginton 1986, Delpit 1995, Moll et al 1992, Meier 1995, Walton 1995). The serious obstacles are of a social-structural nature: to redistribute the codes of *power* reduces exclusive accumulation of cultural capital in power-elite social positions. And so *to actually teach, in schools*, how to perform the power codes in schools is, ironically, a revolutionary act (Zipin & Brennan 2006). It requires critical insight and political-ethical will to ‘teach against the grain’ (Simon 1992) of institutional features which select for elite-born students to ‘win’, and others to ‘lose’, in high stakes

contests of the ‘competitive academic curriculum’ (Connell 1993).

Understandably, such commitment to work against powerful institutional norms is not widespread among the teaching force. More are apt to ‘blame the victims’, and to manoeuvre tactically (and unreflectively), if they can, toward less problematic career havens in schools serving ‘leafy green’ rather than ‘urban fringe’ or ‘bush’ clientele. We might say that these teachers construct professional dispositions and identities oriented to teaching *with* rather than *against* ‘the grain’. Nonetheless, there are teachers who develop proactive and self-affirmative orientations to serve less powerful youth and communities. We might say that such teachers construct ‘against-the-grain’, social justice-oriented dispositions and identities (Ovsienko 2005).

However, for such teachers the pedagogical challenges are great. Youth who do not inherit cultural capital to match elite-coded academic ‘standards’ accumulate humiliations over ‘failings’ as measured against those standards. They thus tend to develop a counter-institutional habitus of alienation towards school learning regimes (Willis 1981). Even when rare leeway is gained to try alternative approaches that make more meaningful curricular connection to their cultural identities, it takes time for such youth to acquire confidence and trust that it is safe to engage such approaches.

It is important, then, to research not only the constraints faced by teachers striving to work ‘against the grain’, but also – as is focal to this paper – how, *at dispositional levels of ‘professional identity’*, such teachers cope with resistances to curricular engagement among youth for whom they seek social-educational justice.

### **A thesis within a research project**

This paper is based on honours thesis research by Ovsienko (2005), attached to a three-year Australian Research Council linkage project (LP0454869) – with the working title ‘Redesigning Pedagogies in the North’ (RPiN) – in which the thesis supervisor, Zipin, is a Chief Investigator. Within RPiN, nine CIs from the University of South Australia work with 32 teacher-researchers from ten secondary public schools, and one primary school, in Adelaide’s northern suburbs. This urban fringe region is recognised as amongst the most ‘disadvantaged’ in Australia, with sharply declining employment, rising poverty, and an influx of immigrant ethnic groups that join a longer-standing white blue collar which, since the 1970s, has increasingly constituted a ‘working class without work’ (Weis 1990). Associated challenges for schools of the region have been chronicled by Thomson (2002).

Focused on middle-schooling, RPiN’s University and teacher researchers collaborate to design units of curricular work that make strong links with students’ localities of place – putting students to work as ‘researchers’ of their own lifeworlds. In the process RPiN researchers look for cultural ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al 1992), and how these are taught and learned, in students’ lives beyond school. Such lifeworld-based knowledge and pedagogies in turn revitalise school curricula and pedagogies through design of new learning units. The aim is ongoing development of curricula and pedagogies that *engage students* through intellectually challenging learning, made richly relevant to their lived-cultural identities, and scaffolded into connection with codes of cultural capital that *enable academic success* (Delpit 1995, Moll et al 1992, Walton 1995, Hattam et al 2004).

The *social justice intent* of this action research is the crucial link between RPiN and the honours thesis research, a case study conducted in RPiN’s first year (2005), exploring what the thesis title articulates: *Doing justice against the grain: A study of teachers’ professional identities when engaged in a project of socially just curriculum change in an urban fringe region*. Eight teachers were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews and a final focus group (six teachers participated on the day). The interviews posed questions about teachers’ professional values, orientations, dispositions and identities in relation to ‘doing justice against the grain’.

The selected teachers have all had teaching careers of ten years or longer (in most cases); and they were all involved in a prior Graduate Certificate course in which they designed and implemented action-research projects to ‘make community curricular’ – i.e. to build stronger connections between school and local community. This course, taught by two eventual RPiN CIs –

the project coordinator, and Zipin – was a key antecedent to RPiN. Of the eight teachers who followed from the Graduate Certificate into RPiN, six further elected to upgrade their Certificates to a Masters of Education through coursework and a research thesis based on their RPiN work with students. All these courses, and RPiN as well, have involved reading and discussion which provide conceptual tools for critical analysis of the power ‘grains’ of mainstream schooling, as well as strategies for ‘teaching against the grain’.

We take these teachers’ persistent readiness to immerse in such work as indicating social justice-oriented dispositions and identities. From a *sociological perspective*, we see ‘professional identity’ as comprising not mere ‘individual personality’ traits, but socially positioned dispositions, relative to others who inhabit diverse positions within the teaching force and in the broader social space (a Bourdieuan concept of ‘professional habitus’ is useful here). Further, we see ‘professional identities’ as complex and dynamic constructions, never fully or finally achieved but continually re-achieved and re-defined. As Sachs (2001, p 6) puts it:

In times of rapid change, identity cannot be seen to be a fixed ‘thing’, it is negotiated, open, shifting ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended power-laden enactment of those meanings in everyday situations.

While such complex identities are not simply reducible to binary-opposite types, Sachs (2003) observes that teacher identities may orient more around discourses of ‘old professionalism’ or, by contrast, ‘new, transformative teacher professionalism’. Britzman (1991) similarly conceives that institution-based ‘authoritarian discourses’, and more reflexively critical ‘internally persuasive discourses’, struggle within the professional identity formations of most teachers, striking different balances.

In the testimonies of interviewed teachers, we find professional identities that tilt significantly towards ‘internally persuasive’ and ‘transformative’ discourse. In what follows we show how these teachers affirm career aims to serve ‘less advantaged’ students and communities, defining proactive commitments to enable their students to thrive as learners, and recognising student embodiments of cultural ‘assets’ (as against ‘deficits’) for learning. At the same time, we show how, in facing the formidable difficulties of working with learners from a region of high poverty and, correlatively, non-elite cultural capital, these teachers present notable ambivalences about pursuing curriculum-focussed, *educative* social justice (Boomer 1999) of a sort that the RPiN project goes after. We analyse how tense identity work, involving ambivalences and emotional labours, revolves around professional strivings to ‘teach against the grain’.

### **Professional identity as teachers of ‘the north’**

In explaining the commitments that sustain them as career professionals, the teachers in this study indicate significant senses of affiliation with the needs of ‘less advantaged’ students and communities. Some say they always wanted to work with such populations, due to identification based in their own similar socio-economic and geographic origins: ‘I was from what you would have to term “the wrong side of the tracks” myself’ (Teacher 1); and ‘I came from a background like that myself’ (Teacher 3). Others identify themselves as of more ‘middle class’ positioning, and acknowledge that they initially struggled with the difficulties of such schools: ‘I nearly left at the end of my first semester. I just said, “If the next semester’s not better, I’ll go. It’s too hard”’ (Teacher 5). In such cases, however, the teachers indicate they have since become firmly committed and ‘enjoy the challenge ... [of] finding different ways to help the kids’ (Teacher 4).

In either case, the interviewed teachers distinguish themselves from other types of teachers whom they see as unsuited to work in such schools. This includes colleagues in their schools who do not show due commitment to the challenges of place, instead acting like alienated workers, there just ‘to collect their pay packet’ (Teacher 5). They make critical note of teachers who put mainstream ‘standards’ ahead of care for the particular students they teach. As teacher 6 comments:

[There is] nothing you can do that's worse than to give somebody who doesn't like kids, who thinks that they teach Maths and that's it, or thinks that they teach English and that's their task, and the kids have to fall in line to some pre-ordained kind of standard, or idea that I have in my head. It would just be a disaster.

Teacher 6 here affirms a model of professionalism that identifies with the actual kids one teaches, as against the model of a teacher who identifies primarily and narrowly with subject disciplines. He implies that learning needs of northern suburb kids do not align with pre-ordained 'standards' of mainstream curriculum, and so teachers should adapt their pedagogic approaches accordingly.

More sympathetic profiles are made of teachers who seem well-intentioned yet are unable to muster the requisite capacities for successful teaching in these schools. Says teacher 2:

And there are some people who actually do try to build relationships, I find, but no matter how hard they try, they don't succeed. They are committed to do it, so sometimes personalities ... don't suit our school.

Translating this to more sociological language, teacher 2 here differentiates herself from those who lack *dispositions* (rather than 'personalities') needed for building relationships that successfully engage youth of this region. The teachers in this study nominated dispositions such as resilience; optimism; a capacity to take 'not knowing' as a provocation to learn more (said Teacher 3: 'The more you learn the less you know'); and the desire to grow and change through learning, and through relating this learning to that of their students. Thus, in the above quote, Teacher 2 identifies herself as more capable than 'some' teachers to meet challenges of engaging northern suburb youth. (The sense of requiring a deep-seeded 'knack' leads some of the interviewed teachers to imply that the needed dispositions are innate: 'Some people just know how to manage our kids, I think' (Teacher 5); but 'I don't think you can learn it' (Teacher 6)).

Self-portrayals as a specific and atypical kind of 'professional', more suited than most to working with challenges that such youth present, are indicated in statements such as 'it just seems that I do kind of like some perversities, like working in that kind of environment' (Teacher 6); and 'Funnily enough, I do prefer it at [current school as opposed to previous 'middle class' country school]' (Teacher 4). These self-ironic expressions underline a sense that working in northern suburb schools would be seen by most teachers as extremely difficult, not likely to be rewarding and so not to be sought or valued as ongoing career placements. In their contrasting affirmations of professional commitments to serve 'disadvantaged' students and communities, these teachers thus identify themselves as dis-positionally different from most teachers.

Indeed, the teachers of this study differentiate themselves not only from 'less suited' colleagues they have witnessed in northern suburbs schools, but also from those who prefer teaching in schools of prosperous 'leafy green' areas: 'But I do think some teachers who aren't suited to our schools are suited to other schools and do quite a good job ... because they're delivering quite good curriculum ... kids will work with them and appreciate them' (Teacher 5). Many cite lack of positive identification – and corresponding capacity to build positive relationships – with students who do not easily succeed academically, as key differences between teachers who are successful in the Northern Suburbs and those who are not. The students need to see, observes to Teacher 5, that 'you like them and respect them; instead of, like, you're going to do this task today, and when you get the whole anger thing coming at you, then you confront them'. Teacher 6 adds that the students will 'respond not to the pedagogy, to the curriculum, they'll respond to the person'.

### **Identification *with* and *for* the students**

In articulating how they see themselves suited to work with northern area youth, the interviewed teachers sometimes evoke a pithy idealism that isn't very precise about region/class-based learning

needs. Teacher 6 talks of his commitment to northern students as a ‘kind of missionary thing’: that ‘this is kind of what I’ve worked out I’m here for’. Teacher 7 says she’s ‘always thought that I would work with young people, and that I would help young people to improve their lives, or to do the best that they could in some way’. Teacher 4 seeks for ‘all the kids, no matter what, getting the best possible chances they can’ and is pleased to be able to say that ‘after ten years I haven’t lost my idealism’. Teacher 8 aims to ‘help them make some positive decisions and changes in their lives that will complement where they currently are in their life’.

Such statements of motive to improve the decisions and life chances of ‘all kids, no matter what’, carry only vague hints of a sense that northern area students need educational approaches which differ from mainstream schooling-as-usual. In other testimonies, however, these teachers suggest more critical insights into how the mainstream ‘grains’ of institutional selectivity work against their students, with more specific implications for how they, as teachers, need to adapt. As teacher 8 puts it:

When I first started teaching, it was about doing Science and trying to make it interactive and interesting for students, but in terms of changing people’s thought processes and changing their thinking, and you know, tackling their broader learning skills to allow them to have success further down the track in life, and how those skills might be able to be transferred into an adult life, none of those issues ever came into it. But, I suppose now ... that has gradually developed.

This statement suggests that, from experience, teacher 8 has learned how even ‘progressive’ pedagogic approaches – if of a too *generic* constructivist sort – are not likely to spur curricular engagement of northern suburb students. Rather, pedagogies that take more *specific* account of students’ situated ways of knowing and learning are required. Over the time of his career, this teacher has gradually developed readiness to seek approaches more relevant to students’ cultural lifeworlds, which could enable greater chances of success in school and pathways beyond. In more critical language, Teacher 3 expresses a similar credo of pedagogic adaptability and willingness to use less mainstream funds of knowledge (Moll et al 1992) that students embody:

For us to succeed with kids here ... I think the old traditional stuff, the style of teaching isn’t going to work. Focusing on the way we do things, redesigning what we do in the classroom is really important. Kids nowadays have different literacies, so we’ve got to look at different ways of using those literacies.

Such willingness to work against the grain of ‘traditional textbook methods’ (Teacher 4) or ‘dead wood’ teaching (Teacher 1), provokes these teachers to invest in their own ongoing learning in pursuit of educational engagement with the youth they teach. They thus differentiate themselves from teachers who resist change in their teaching methodologies. Teacher 3 identifies herself in contrast to teachers who are ‘quite happy in their little place and being where they are, and you know, could work, doesn’t work, whatever, they’re happy, and they don’t want to move on, don’t want to do anything else’. Teacher 1 insists, ‘If you don’t learn, and if you’re not prepared to change, if you, if you teach the same for twenty years, the same thing year after year after year, I think that you shouldn’t be in that profession’. Teacher 8 implies that this is not simply a matter of experience but also of disposition: ‘Length of time doesn’t equate to experience. [Sometimes] it just simply means that you’ve been doing something wrong for 30 years’. For teachers of this study, then, a key element of professional identity is the disposition to keep learning in order to change one’s teaching to suit changing times and specific places (Sachs 2003; Hargreaves 1994).

In affirming the need for ongoing professional learning so as to be adaptable to era and place, these teachers testify, from experience, that this does not come easily. Teacher 6 notes that, although a common expectation of beginning teachers is that the job will become easier with each year, 'that wasn't actually the case ... because we tend to shift the goal-posts a bit, so we, it's difficult, but it's difficult at a different level' (Teacher 6). Professional adaptability can involve not just difficult challenges, but emotional risk to one's sense of professional competence. As teacher 2 puts it:

[C]hange is so important, it is important and people hate it, people can shirk away from it and don't want to know about it because they're safe. And this is what I'm experiencing I suppose, I've left my 'safe' zone, and I've got to take some steps out there which are quite treacherous to me, and quite difficult to do.

Similarly, teacher 8 reflects:

You go through teaching for many, many years and you think, you go through your stages of learning your profession [...] and you finally realise that there's so much you don't know, because you never know what you don't know.

In embracing a need for ongoing change in their practice, these teachers thus cultivate a professional capacity to live more-or-less comfortably with 'not knowing' and, indeed, to take this as provocation to keep learning not just about teaching, but about the particular youth whom they teach. Teacher 2 testifies that, through the Graduate Certificate, RPiN and the Masters of Education, she has 'realised how much I don't know'; and she attenuates how this might threaten her sense of professional capacity through parallel identification with the learning challenges faced by their students: 'I can relate to what they're going through, and ... I suppose together, I'm hoping, we can do something, and come up with something'. Similarly, teacher 3 says:

Because it's a learning journey, so it's that, you've got to change, you've got to be flexible, you've got to love where you are, you've got to keep learning, you've got to keep going on journeys with the kids, and you've got to keep, keep finding out all the different things that are going on, to make a difference.

In contrast with other teacher 'types' who, in holding to traditional curricula and pedagogies, seem insufficiently ready or able to appreciate the situated learning needs of northern suburb youth, these teachers testify that clinging to mainstream ways of doing things cannot work. As teacher 1 puts it: 'This is the type of school where if you didn't change you'd be dead'. The teachers of this study instead cultivate dispositions of humility about what they know, and towards continual learning about how to change their practices, linked with a will to better understand the students they teach. In these ways, they work against blaming victims for learning 'handicaps' that can thwart one's sense of professional 'success'. They dare to risk professional esteem in the more challenging identity work of orienting themselves proactively *for*, not against, youth from 'less advantaged' social-structural positions.

Such identification *with* and *for* students enables these teachers explicitly to challenge the sorts of *deficit* views that are understandably (but unacceptably) typical within the teaching force. Teacher 8 thus states his exception to such a view:

And I think, this idea about going against the grain, the biggest grain I see in my school, and from conversations I've had with people teaching in the Northern area schools, that going against the grain is going against the belief in schools that students come from a deficit perspective, and we're always working against untangling that misconception that teachers have. And I think that's a constant battle, certainly where I am, it's a constant battle.

In a similar vein, Teacher 4 observes that

there's a few staff who can be a little bit negative about the kids on occasions, and if you hear it too often, it can get you down ... being strong in your beliefs and what you want for the kids is what you've got to keep firmly in mind.

Like other teachers, those in this study have experienced how difficult it is to bring students from 'disadvantaged' regions (who do not inherit power-elite cultural capital) into learning relation with curricular 'standards' (which encode elite cultural capital). However, they construct atypically *power-sensitive* explanations of how and why their students struggle with mainstream curricula. This enables a 'turn-around' (Comber & Kamler 2004) in which they see their students as inheritors of learning *assets* from home and community lifeworlds: *rich funds* of cultural meaning and knowledge (Moll et al 1992), albeit not the 'winning' species of cultural *capital* in relation to dominant 'standards'. Teacher 3 articulates the struggle to turn from a 'deficit' to an 'asset' perspective:

[Y]ou do, you still make judgements about them. I can't stop that, you can't help that ... but they are times when they are being difficult, and I guess that's a reaction to things that you can't control. But then you turn, and the Pat Thompson stuff about virtual schoolbags [a metaphor for how youth embody richer cultural knowledge and capacities than schools typically engage; see Thomson 2002] which turns all that stuff around quite quickly.

The teachers indicate various efforts they make to acknowledge student expertise, and draw on their funds of knowledge, in curricular ways. Teacher 4 puts it: 'As far as I'm concerned, I could never skateboard, they can. That's their funds of knowledge; I'm using it and it's working ... it's just a matter of getting in there and finding out'. Teacher 4 notes further that this 'allows the kids who aren't quite so brilliant, to catch up I suppose and be on an even footing. So I like how that works, using what they bring with them [...] also, I suppose I see them more as kids with a future.'

### **Ambivalences and emotional labours in striving to *educate* 'against the grain'**

Our data thus far illustrates the social justice-oriented identity work by which teachers construct views of northern suburb students as embodying cultural 'assets' for learning, rather than 'deficits' which make them seem 'unteachable'. However, such views do not go untroubled in the trials of classroom practice. For one thing, 'relevant' curricula and pedagogies, suited to the regional 'thisness' (Thomson 2002) of students' situated lives, are not simple matters to develop, and, when at hand, are not easily implemented. Even if mainstream institutional limits are reasonably gotten around, students – who by the middle years have suffered accumulated humiliations through standardised selective mechanisms – will have formed habits of counter-institutional resistance. Even the most richly 'relevant' curricula and pedagogies will still need negotiation in 'safe' learning spaces over significant time (a rare prospect) to win student trust to 'try again'.

Moreover, even teachers from less powerful class/regional origins embody, in their professional

habitus, the dispositions of having been ‘winners’ in what Connell (1993) calls the competitive academic curriculum (CAC). They have succeeded in a system that stresses Tertiary Entrance Results earned through knowledge and cultural capital that universities valorise (which thus dominate senior secondary curricula and so trickle down to middle years). Negotiating the dissonances across home and school cultures is not easy, creating conflict for teachers between identifying with students’ lifeworld funds of knowledge and identity, and the teachers’ own habits of identification with the CAC. Thomson (2002) discusses how, in ‘disadvantaged’ schools, discrepancies between the place-based habitus of students, and institutionally valorised cultural capitals, result in a tension between two ‘layers’ of schooling:

[Y]ou have a layer about relationships and the community because that’s distinctly different from the culture of the school, and then you have another bit that’s about learning and the formal curriculum. In leafy green schools [...] there’s much closer congruence between the students, parents and community and the teachers and the school. (p 46)

When immersed in the everyday micro-environment of school and classroom, this discrepancy may register as ‘layers’ of subjective tension wherein teachers come to question whether a rigorously ‘academic’ approach suits their students. There can be conflict between (1) understanding oneself as an institutionally authorised ‘curriculum expert’ whose role first and foremost is to guide students in academic work leading to school completion and possible tertiary entrance; and (2) a sense of ‘hard realities’ that seem to advise a scaling down of academic expectations. Thus, even in striving for ‘asset’ views of students’ cultural inheritances, teachers may question the ways and degrees by which these ‘assets’ can be put to work *curricularly*.

Teacher talk about the importance of the teaching-learning relationship can then slide toward rather non-*educative* senses of ‘relationship’. Statements from teachers in this study indeed demonstrate ambivalence about the educability of their students in academic curricular terms. On the one hand, they affirm commitments to relevant yet rigorous curricula and associated pedagogies for enabling students to engage intellectually and achieve academically, ‘because these are the building blocks that you build for the rest of your life’ (Teacher 4). In this spirit, teachers recognise that efforts put into building ‘positive relationships’ with students are suspect if they merely nurture what Boomer (1999) calls ‘substanceless self-esteem’ – i.e. lacking substantive basis in educational accomplishment, as ‘*earned* self-esteem’. Thus, teacher 6 asserts:

You can have good relationships with kids without teaching them a lot, [but] the higher level is engaging them in the curriculum.

This statement suggests that teaching-and-learning relationships must give due regard to rigorous and challenging curriculum work. However, this same teacher, in another moment of testimony, expresses significant doubt about how far this ‘higher level’ of engagement can be made focal in classroom work with northern suburb students:

In the big picture, teaching in the North is not about curriculum. ... If the behaviour management thing has fallen apart, then, you know, it’s a bit like tinkering at the edges I think, to be concerned about curriculum.

We read this not to suggest that behaviour management comes first in order to create a context for



the primary aim of curricular learning. Rather, for students of ‘the North’, behaviour *is* the ‘big picture’ to a degree that attenuates and defers curricular focus. Teacher 6 did not consciously register the contradiction across his statements. We suggest that the curriculum/behaviour tension is an element of fraught identity work at more-or-less subconscious levels of professional habitus.

Tendencies to ease off from a substantially *educative* focus for teacher-student relationships can express themselves in subtle ways. For example, teacher 2 advocated that ‘the whole package needs to be right’ and ‘you have to engage them somehow, otherwise they become bored’. This stress on a ‘whole package’ for ‘somehow engaging them’ might reasonably suggest that much besides curriculum work *per se* goes into creating student engagement as a *sine qua non* for curriculum work. However, implications tilt more toward a lessening of curricular emphasis when we consider teacher 2’s further account of how she understands her role in relation to the students she teaches:

It’s all part of life though, isn’t it? We’re not all going to be University, not all kids are going to be University students. We’ve just got to accept that variety (Teacher 2).

We suggest that these and other instances of contradictory statement, from the same teacher across different interview moments, illustrate how northern suburb teachers struggle at subconscious levels to negotiate tensions between (1) seeing ‘engagement’ as crucial to successful curricular work that might lead to more socially just school outcomes, thus interrupting the reproductive cycle of ‘disadvantage’; and (2) a sense that, for ‘disadvantaged varieties’ of student, it may need to be accepted that serious curricular effort belongs in a ‘too hard’ basket. Moreover, this can imply the sort of ‘deficit’ thinking about northern suburb youth that these same teachers explicitly criticise in other moments of testimony. A danger, according to Boomer (1999, p 49), is that this can slide towards a ‘nurturing mentality which [prevails] over a teaching mentality’, neglecting the ‘earned esteem’ function of teaching that is centrally about educational developments. At the same time that these teachers struggle to avoid such a slide, they nonetheless often speak of needing to get other things ‘right’ – such as ‘behaviour management’ or ‘the whole package’ – before they can give substantial focus to curricular exigencies.

Discourse about ‘more whole’ approaches to students, linked to the idea that they are ‘not all’ University bound, is indeed prominent among these teachers. This is understandable given that northern suburbs schools have never sent many students to university: according to one teacher, her school has placed only six in university programs in the past seven years. This can incite teachers to see not only the CAC, but also more ‘relevant’ curricula that still stress ‘intellectual engagement’ – with academic success as a goal – as ‘unrealistic’; and this teachers’ school indeed invests strongly in ‘vocational’ curricula (which we would argue do not engage students in the ways or degrees hoped). Such ‘vocational’ emphasis may be accompanied by rationales that romanticise future work-plus-life possibilities for northern suburb students (perhaps matching, in opposite direction, the pessimism about possibilities of academic curricular success). For example, in arguing the virtues of educating for well-rounded participation in life, teacher 1 queries:

What’s wrong with a person earning a good wage, doing what they want to do, being happy? Who says they have to go any further in education?

This suggests that ‘doing what they want to do’, and getting ‘a good wage’ for it, is readily to be had. However, adults in this teacher’s school catchment have been severely and chronically un(der)employed for a few generations – on a curve that is rising, not falling – and youth have not tended to move from the area as they mature into the next generation of un(der)employed adults. Nonetheless, the teachers offer many moments of discourse that, in stressing ‘education for life’ and the ‘happiness’ of ‘whole students’, edge away from urgency to enable students to complete school

with tertiary possibilities. For example, teacher 8 affirms:

I think, myself, a successful student is one who comes along and I see an improvement in their social skills, in their personal outlook on life, and I think they're the values that we hold dear.

Similarly, teacher 5 says:

And they reach the end of year 12 and they have some direction, they're not just going to nothing, but they've worked out who they are, and that they're happy to be doing such and such, whatever it happens to be.

And teacher 3, in addressing the question of whether and how teachers 'make a difference' for their students, suggests that it is

[in the] personal stuff, that you make a difference ... You don't necessarily see a difference in the academic stuff, unless you switch a kid on to something that excites them.

These statements don't explicitly negate teachers' roles in making a difference in 'the academic stuff'. We would argue, however, that they tend to hedge bets on, and to dampen, emphasis on academic curricular work. This may partly involve teachers' sober senses of the power by which grains of mainstream institutional selectivity lack regard for northern suburb cultural 'assets'. But we argue that it also involves teachers' strategic impulses to protect themselves from what Thomson (2002, p 9) calls the 'heartbreak of utopian ideals'. We believe that a sense of 'heartbreak' of this sort is endemic to the professional habitus of northern suburb teachers who would teach 'against the grain'; and it can erupt into conscious in overwhelming moments – as in teacher 6's remarkably candid statement of emotional labours:

I think basically, teachers who stick at it day in and day out, like all of us, and always hope for better things, and always work at trying to improve things, are basically borderline insane. You know, honestly, when we sit back and listen to these tapes in six months, we're going to be saying to ourselves, 'Why the hell are we still doing this job? Why are we doing this to ourselves?' And that's the honest truth, I believe.

A capacity for such 'insane' optimism, enduring all the dark doubts and tensions that lurk beneath, appears to be a key disposition for functional professional habitus among teachers working against institutional reinforcements of 'disadvantage'. Notwithstanding the grainy difficulties of their work with northern suburb youth, the teachers in this study agree that they generally sustain a sense of optimism about getting somewhere with their students. As teacher 6 further reflected: 'If I ask myself "Are they going to do it today?" ... probably not, but here we go, we go again, because every day is a new day, you get a new chance'. Teacher 8 asks whether 'the teachers who don't do that, who don't have that sense of optimism ... are they the ones who go out on stress and end up leaving?'

However, such 'optimism' may have the flip side of a 'realism' that attenuates investment in

stressful challenges of curricular work with students. The teachers identify ‘realism’ as crucial to their ability to carry on: as Teacher 1 says, ‘I think we’re probably fairly grounded as realists’. They talk of self-preservation, of the need for strategies for mental health and well-being. Many affirm ‘resilience’ as necessary to ‘work their way through it’ (Teacher 4) and to enable them to ‘stop, think, redirect’ rather than be ‘totally destroyed’ and ‘become more and more cynical’ (Teacher 3).

It may be that teachers’ self-protectiveness extends to their students, as strategic impulses to guard both themselves and students against the ‘heartbreak of utopian ideals’. The teachers testify to everyday lived experiences in which they ‘constantly battle low literacy in the area’ (Teacher 1) and ‘gaps in student knowledge’ (Teacher 3). In embodying such gaps, observes Teacher 1, her students ‘start on the back foot’ therefore ‘their achievements are nowhere near as noticeable or high-flying [as students in ‘leafy green’ schools]’. Such appraisal of students’ ‘low literacy’ and ‘knowledge gaps’ can, again, verge toward ‘deficit’ thinking. Participation in the RPiN project encourages ‘asset’ thinking based on investment in more ‘*relevant*’ curricula and pedagogies, substantially informed by life-world funds of knowledge; and, as earlier-quote testimony shows, the teachers do buy into such learning possibilities for their students. However, this purchase is not without ambivalences: some also question it, arguing that the RPiN emphasis on *curricular* social justice may not be what their students need. Says Teacher [?]: ‘They [RPiN approaches] come very much from a curriculum base, you know like, it’s “get this curriculum into the kids” ... but I have my doubts, because it’s not happening that way for me right now’; although, somewhat ambivalently, she states agreement that development of more relevant curriculum is ‘a big part of the answer; I just think it’s a layer’.

Teachers’ wariness about expecting too much (from themselves and from students) can induce a sobering of expectations that puts limits on a curricular dimension of social-educational justice. Stating his sense of identity as a teacher in ‘the North’, relative to teachers in more middle-upper class areas, Teacher 6 says:

I can see that the curriculum we offer is aimed towards kids who are going on to university, but ... I do what I think will be valuable for [our] kids, to be achievable.

In this regard, the teachers agree that their expectations are different to those of teachers in the ‘leafy greens’. As Teacher 8 explains:

I think that if you asked the majority of the teachers involved in the RPiN project about what they value in people who are successful, and then asked another group of teachers who could only aspire to teaching the 20s [perfect test scores in high-stakes senior secondary exams] in the leafy greens, I think you would get a different picture.

The implication is that, more so than in ‘leafy green’ areas, other-than-academic criteria for a ‘successful person’ are valued when working with ‘less advantaged’ learners. Teacher 6 also indicates how identity builds around different criteria for professional self-worth when working with those who are far from ‘20s’:

I often try and work out why, you know you are saying what is the pay-off, why do you do it, and certainly it’s not from a, you know I haven’t had anybody score a 20, or haven’t had any Rhodes scholars that acknowledge me as their motivator or anything like that.

These statements offer further illustration of how teachers in this study construct their professionalism by regional contrast to 'leafy green' teachers. As we have tried to illustrate throughout this section, they carry a sense of how teacher identity forms around tense ambivalences and emotional labours in combining (1) career location in schools of a 'disadvantaged' region; and (2) professional commitments to teach 'against the grain' in working *for* students and communities of such regions.

### **Conclusion: The complexities of teacher identity work in striving to 'do justice'**

The ambivalences and emotional labours we have chronicled do not signify 'failures' of wisdom, ethics or nerve on the part of the teachers. Rather, they signal how difficult are the strains of trying to do justice against powerfully sedimented institutional grains, such that questions mark understandably infuse the identity work of teachers for whom 'doing justice' is integral to a sense of 'being professional'. The RPiN approach to 'doing justice' promotes the idea that curricula built on meaningful lifeworld connectedness can engage students in rigorous intellectual challenges, and thus 'work' for teachers and students alike. However, deep institutional constraints, and deeply ingrained patterns of habitus (among teachers and students) troubles any simple and straightforward 'doing' of 'justice' in this way. We continue to believe that efforts to engage northern suburb students through both 'relevant' and 'rigorous' curricular work can and should be pursued as a way to increase students' possibilities – both experiential and in terms of life chances – for greater 'rewards' through schooling. However, the strains experienced among teacher colleagues in the RPiN research project must be duly acknowledged and evaluated if the complex challenges of acting on such an aim are to be recognised and taken into account.

Moreover, the daunted and ambivalent strains in these teachers' voicings should keep us mindful of how aspirational, indeterminate and forever 'to come' (Derrida 2001) is any 'justice' pursued through efforts to provoke change in institutional ways and means. We introduced our data analysis with a conception of teacher professional identity as constituted through struggles, and achieved balances, between 'traditional' and 'transformative' discourses (Sachs), or 'authoritarian' and 'internally persuasive' voices (Britzman). Having journeyed through the data to this 'concluding' moment of our paper, we suggest that such formulations of struggle and balance between *poles* are perhaps too neatly binary. The teachers' voicings of their identity work do not suggest precise locations along a continuum between poles. Rather, they suggest how identities taking form around pursuit of 'justice' are indeed rough and grainy 'works in process'. And they suggest that capacities to work from a profane mix of 'radical' and 'pragmatic' impulses (Boomer 1999) – with uncertainties about (yet continued quest for) what might be 'transformational' change – are perhaps the substance of viably *professional* identities in 'disadvantaged' schools of the foreseeable future.

These teachers testimonies illustrate how working *for* rather than *counter to* the students they teach, led by working senses of 'doing justice', enables them to build dispositional resources for avoiding alienation and sustaining hope. Notwithstanding the difficulties and tensions of teaching in 'disadvantaged' schools, and associated lacks of professional recognition or status, they continue to construct self-affirming identities which highlight the intent to seek gains for students in terms of educational experiences and ensuing life chances. While acknowledging the 'risks' and 'unknowings' that can trouble senses of 'self' as capable professionals, they achieve reasonably cohesive identity structures that include self-renewing commitments to work with, and on behalf of, students against whom the high-stakes 'game' of schooling is traditionally rigged. They show us that a perspective which sees such students as intelligent and embodying assets for learning can take problematic yet meaningful root within teachers dispositions and identities, providing resources of hope and strength in teaching 'against the grain'.

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