

SCHOOLING AND THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: WHAT CAN AND SHOULD WE BE DOING?

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To speak of an ideal is to lay claim to what ought or should be and to explain 'reality' as deviation. That is, ideals serve to provide direction towards some desired goal as well as judgment about how well a perceived reality approximates that desire. In more recent times, the postmodernist critique has provided its own 'reality check' on modernist ideals, challenging the notion that there is one best way to reach utopian ends. The emergence of postmodern theories has signalled a general shift in 'the structure of feeling'ⁱ from acquiescence to censure of the universal. But it is not as if there are no postmodern ideals. In these accounts, utopianism is more cogently understood as 'heterotopianisms'. While we are convinced by such critique, that there are diverse goals of value and pathways to reach them, we admit to some uneasiness about a 'postmodern pluralism' in which ideals have the potential to wash away into relativism, where one ideal is as good as the next and ways of achieving them are also equally regarded.

In this article we take up these matters in the context of schooling, particularly as they relate to socially just ideals and practices. We begin by testing how effective schooling 'really' is in advancing the interests of all students; asking for whom schooling is effective and the ways in which it recognises and deals with diverse interests. We then consider how things might be better, first in relation to what happens in classrooms and, second, with respect to what happens in school communities. In our view, these two interests – in who benefits (and who does not) by current social arrangements and what can be done about them – are the central tenets of a socially critical orientation. Given our disposition for recognitive justice,ⁱⁱ we also think the issues are about self-identity and respect, self-expression and development, and self-determination. We regard these as necessary conditions for socially just schooling; they form the 'tests' we apply, particularly in relation to how students are connected to schools and how decisions are made within their communities. We recognise that these matters are primarily concerned with the means rather than the ends of schooling although we do not entirely agree with the separation. Neither do we want to signal that a focus on recognitive justice is at the expense of distributive justice. 'Who gets what' remains an important issue. Here we address this from the perspective of 'how'.

Our analysis is confined to research and scholarship found in the academic literature. There is enough in the public dataset concerning these issues to suggest that further empirical evidence may simply provide saturation. We think it may be better, then, to take stock of what is known as a beginning point for future empirical work. Hence, we begin with what we (now) know about schooling and its effectiveness in moving beyond the goal of 'compensation' for the least advantaged and towards the reorganisation of the cultural content of education as a whole.ⁱⁱⁱ Having made the judgment that things could be better, we then canvass areas in need of revision and draw out from the literature what those revisions might entail. Specifically, we ask: what should be the (learning) experiences of students in schools?; and how and by whom should schools be managed? Rather than specific strategies for effective change, what we identify are principles to inform these strategies and beginning points for research that is cognizant of the uniqueness of specific educational contexts.

HOW EFFECTIVE ARE SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS AND THEIR LEARNING?

For some time, the blame for the academic failure of many children from working class backgrounds, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups has been placed at the feet of culturally 'disadvantaged' or 'deprived' children and their families.^{iv} In this account, deviations from the cultural ideal are viewed as deficiencies and imperfections, and 'deprived' children are seen to come from a group 'with no cultural integrity of its own'.^v Terms such as 'minority' and 'marginalised' also tend to suggest that all such groups are in the same situation; that all of them are disenfranchised from the larger society in much the same way.^{vi} Informed by these assumptions, that 'disadvantaged' students are growing up in 'a web of social pathology and inadequate life experiences',^{vii} it has become the task of schooling to 'compensate' these children for their 'deficits'.^{viii} While

this model of deficiency and remediation still has many adherents, it does little except to find fault with students and their life experiences.^{ix}

What is missing from this account is recognition that education is often driven by political interests that seek to legitimate particular ways of life^x by regulating the selection, organisation and distribution of school knowledge.^{xi} In this process it is the values, experiences and perspectives of privileged groups that parade as universal in schools. This cultural imperialism renders the perspectives of non-dominant groups invisible and blocks their opportunities to exercise their capacities in socially recognised ways.^{xii} The result is that:

... what meanings are considered the most important, what experiences are deemed the most legitimate, and what forms of writing and reading matter are largely determined by those groups who control the economic and cultural apparatuses of a given society.^{xiii}

Bourdieu^{xiv} likens these social arrangements to that of a game. What might appear to some as ‘simple games of chance offering at every moment the possibility of a miracle’,^{xv} are really highly structured processes that favour some students more than others. Below we suggest that there are at least four ways in which this game is played in schools, to greater or lesser effect: game plans alternatively enacted by the dominant and the marginalised and which we refer to as (1) stacking the deck; (2) beating the odds (the aberration that legitimates the game); (3) one rule for us, another rule for them; and (4) opting out.

Stacking the deck

Both teachers and their students bring their cultural understandings into the classroom and school. In the best of circumstances, home, family, school, neighbourhood and society are complementary and reinforcing, ‘guiding children’s positive development into informed citizens and economically independent adults’.^{xvi} This is more often the experience of children from dominant groups (white, middle-class, western, and so on) given that schools are largely staffed by teachers from similar backgrounds who reflect and authorise similar views.^{xvii} For instance, the particular ideologies and practices recognised as legitimate in many schools privilege middle-class students over others.^{xviii} Children from families that reflect the attitudes, beliefs and knowledges of this dominant ethnic and middle-class culture are among those that tend to find themselves the most empowered by schooling; their dispositions closely matching those encouraged and rewarded by the school.

Bourdieu^{xix} argues that this is because schools tend to draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of society; typically, on the cultural experiences in the homes of Anglo and affluent families, which facilitate their children’s adjustment to school and their academic achievement. Many of these ‘school ready’ children have learnt skills that are useful in formal contexts of education and possess the habitus (ways of being and doing) that makes ‘playing the game’ of school easier.^{xx} Perhaps the cruellest trick of all is that schooling can contribute to social inequality by giving success to those groups who possess existing cultural advantage, while appearing to reward individual intelligence and effort. And those who ‘succeed’ in society sometimes fail to question the social system from which they have profited; not realising that they are being rewarded for legitimating – even embracing – the way the system operates.^{xxi}

At the same time, the voices and experiences of marginalised groups tend to be excluded and students’ inherited linguistic and cultural competencies (cultural capital) devalued.^{xxii} Unfamiliar with the institutional routines of and lacking the cultural capital valued by schooling, these students are likely to do poorly at school. This is because not all cultural capital is equal in status: some groups and their particular dispositions are ‘socially dominant – carry[ing] with them social power and access to economic success’^{xxiii}; whereas the cultural capital of others’ homes and communities is significantly under-valued. Students in this second group can experience a mismatch or clash of cultures should the school impose a set of values and beliefs incongruent with those learned at home^{xxiv} and can find that ‘educational knowledge is uncommonsense knowledge’^{xxv} that is removed from their everyday experiences and understandings. When this cultural difference between home and school is significant and little is done to recognise and ratify ‘home practices’,^{xxvi} students are prevented from seeing their own experiences of life and family as relevant to their learning at school. The exclusion of the knowledge and experience of the marginalised can lead to children entering school poorly prepared to meet the requirements of what is predominantly a middle-class orientation to schooling, frequently resulting in their alienation and failure.^{xxvii}

It is often through this ‘hidden curriculum’ of attitudes, values and authoritative relations that structural inequalities and existing patterns of social class are reproduced in schools.^{xxviii} In such circumstances, the ideology of the prevailing group in society is taken for granted as ‘natural’ and serves to perpetuate the status quo.^{xxix} It can be seen, then, that in spite of the best of intentions, educators can very easily become agents of hegemony.^{xxx}

Beating the odds

More often than not, irrelevant curricula is the norm for minority students, with schools rarely modifying their curriculum and teaching to meet individual needs. However, teachers can act as agents of transformation as well as reproduction. That is, depending on the curriculum on offer, schools and teachers can either:

... silence students by denying their voice, that is, by refusing to allow them to speak from their own histories, experiences, and social positions, or [they] can enable them to speak by being attentive to how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and critical way.^{xxxvi}

Clearly, we should not imply that minority groups cannot do well in majority-culture settings. While the process of unequal educational opportunity and social and economic reproduction is deeply rooted and it cannot be denied that social class, race/ethnicity, and gender all impact on the educational outcomes of students, schooling is not a wholly deterministic process. Students do not pass through schools like pawns beholden to their parents' race and/or socioeconomic class.^{xxxvii} It is not as simple as that. Rather,

... the process of inequity is shaped by the complex interaction between people's past histories, group and individual identities, self-efficacy and self-esteem, and their relationships with one another and the ever-changing structures and cultures in which they find themselves.^{xxxviii}

In short, students are actively involved in determining their own futures; 'cooperating with or resisting teachers and the school system'.^{xxxix} It should come as no surprise that some children will be 'reluctant to give up the only way they know of interacting with the world and will resist having an alien set of styles imposed upon them'.^{xl} Nevertheless, there is the possibility for teachers and students to 'play the game' in ways that change the game itself,^{xli} by beginning from the standpoint of the least advantaged,^{xlii} for example. As Bourdieu explains:

... players can play to increase or conserve their capital, their number of tokens, in conformity with the tacit rules of the game and the prerequisites of the reproduction of the game and its stakes; but they can also get in it to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game.^{xliii}

There are good reasons to play the game differently, even from the standpoint of the advantaged. As Connell notes, 'an education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage'.^{xliiii} That is, when a schooling system deals unjustly with some of its pupils, '*the quality of education for all the others is degraded*'.^{xliiii}

One rule for us, another rule for them

While many argue that the curriculum should be an open space for exploring the world in which we live, the 'competitive academic curriculum'^{xliii} functions to name and privilege particular histories and experiences^{xliii} and to marginalise or silence the voices of 'othered' groups. When certain knowledge is selected and legitimated as *the* school curriculum, the dominant succeed in displacing other knowledges and experiences by ensuring that it is this 'real' knowledge that determines academic success in the education system^{xliii} and which is rewarded by society at large. Rather than school being an important place for gaining new understandings of culture in a democratic society, an elitist and narrow notion of what counts is supported by this assimilationist paradigm.^{xliiii}

These hidden distinctions are readily apparent in relation to social class, for example. According to Brint,^{xliiii} 'lower-class and minority students typically receive less instructional time, less demanding and lower-quality educational materials, and less imaginative teaching than other students'. Attributed with deficits associated with their disadvantage,^{xliiii} these students are often held to much lower standards than others. Clearly, those who are 'disadvantaged by virtue of their social circumstances can be expected to fall still further behind'.^{xliiii} Indeed, schools contribute to and compound this educational inequality by encouraging some students to lower their expectations to conform to the assessments educators have of them.^{xliiii} Often these assessments lead to the streaming or tracking of students: the practice of grouping them, according to their ability, into classes and courses marked by a differentiated curriculum.^{xliiii} Consistently, it is children who belong to low socio-economic and minority groups that are most likely to end up in lower tracks regardless of whether they are tracked by the school or whether choices are left up to the parents and students themselves.ⁱ Whereas, students from dominant middle-classes usually have more school-related knowledge and are frequently placed more highly than their low socio-economic peers. This is despite research that suggests tracking is educationally harmful to students placed in the lowest tracksⁱⁱ and of dubious value when it comes to promoting an equality of outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some parents' linguistic and cultural differences can make it difficult for them to help their children who are positioned by schooling in these ways, partly because of their lack of access to knowledgeable networks. Their families' social networks tend to be largely comprised of 'people like them': individuals of similar ethnic and

socioeconomic status who provide parents with limited assistance to help their children actively navigate the structures of schooling.^{liii} These minority parents may have little knowledge of the kind valued by schooling and low self-efficacy in academic contexts. Hence, placements doled out by school officials are rarely contested. Instead, beliefs are often reinforced that their children belong in low-track classes, with their abilities to compete in regular or advanced classes questioned.^{liv} Whereas, their more well-to-do counterparts tend to have much more pro-active involvement in the school system^{lv} and use their more highly educated and wealthy social locations to manipulate placement of their child into higher tracks.^{lvi}

As some of the most strategically placed people to effect change in the lives of children, teachers have a central role to play in attempting to redress these injustices. The academic literature suggests that holding high expectations of students^{lvii} and engaging in 'visible' pedagogical practices with high intellectual 'demandingness'^{lviii} may be some of the keys to making a difference for disadvantaged students. By setting high standards for students, letting them know that they are expected to meet them, and providing intellectually challenging lessons corresponding to these expectations, teachers can have a considerable impact on achievement.^{lix}

Reflecting on similar issues, Delpit^{lx} argues that the unequal distribution of knowledge and skills to working class and minority students reflects their exclusion from the codes or rules of the culture of power operating in schools. Unlike middle-class students who have other sites in which to acquire the dominant cultural capital – the family, its communities and so on – children from marginalised groups find themselves doubly disadvantaged with their cultural capital diminished by the school.^{lxi} Drawing on Bernstein's^{lxii} earlier work on visible and invisible pedagogies, Delpit^{lxiii} argues that teachers can make a difference for these students by using visible pedagogic models: making explicit the rules of that culture through examples, illustrations and narratives that facilitate the acquisition of school knowledge and, therefore, make the exercise of power easier. Bernstein^{lxiv} suggests that the use of such pedagogies weakens the relationship between social class and academic achievement, while ensuring that the school provides all students with 'the discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society'.^{lxv}

Opting out

Teachers in disadvantaged communities have an important part to play as 'key mediators of wider social values, goods and practices'.^{lxvi} Young^{lxvii} similarly contends that it is the role of teachers to redress the oppressive institutional constraints that render the perspectives of students from non-dominant groups as invisible and which inhibit them from exercising their capabilities and expressing their experiences and ideas. The challenge for teachers is to teach the academic skills and competencies required to enable their students to succeed in mainstream societies, whilst also ensuring that this content is appropriate to local communities. Yet, despite repeated calls for teachers to be aware of and build upon the literacies their students bring to classrooms,^{lxviii} many schools continue to give priority to the stories of the lives enjoyed by 'well-off, highly educated and socially conforming groups'.^{lxix} Historically, schools have tended to 'connect best with, and work best for, students of middle-class, Anglo, male backgrounds',^{lxx} with the values, experiences and perspectives of these privileged groups parading as universal.

Others sometimes respond by rejecting the legitimacy of schools, dismissing them as institutions of dominant groups.^{lxxi} Excluded rather than respected for their difference, they develop an identity of themselves as outcasts, displaying a pattern of low commitment to schooling and behaviour that is not at all irrational in an environment that is viewed as 'uncaring, culturally incompetent, antagonistic, and oppressive'.^{lxxii} Given the discontinuities between home and school, it is hardly surprising that these students choose to leave, perceiving schooling as irrelevant to their needs and interests^{lxxiii} and feeling as though they are not valued. Unlike the experiences of many white middle-class children, the cultural mismatch experienced by minority students can impact on their motivation, beliefs and values.^{lxxiv} With respect to academic achievement, these can affect their will to learn and impact adversely on their interest, persistence, and attention to activities promoted by schooling.^{lxxv} Children may respond in this oppressive setting by:

... (a) decid[ing] that what they *should* do is not what the teacher thinks should be done; (b) act[ing] in such a way that they *will not* do what the teacher wants, and (c) display[ing] what they *can* do in ways that are not in accordance with what the teacher prescribes.^{lxxvi}

In the research of Fordham and Ogbu^{lxxvii} on African-American students and peer group influence, they found that the perception of schooling as a subtractive process – that is, as 'one-way acculturation into the cultural frame of reference of the dominant group members of their society'^{lxxviii} – caused some students to resist and oppose achieving success in their academic pursuits. These students viewed success as 'white people's prerogative' and striving for success in school as 'acting white' at the expense of their own cultural and identity integrity.^{lxxix} The resulting social pressures against striving for academic success can mean that some students who are academically able perform well below their potential. These students are choosing, either consciously

or unconsciously, to maintain their view of their own identity in what they perceive as a choice between allegiance to 'them' or 'us'.^{lxxx}

WHAT SHOULD BE THE (LEARNING) EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS?

While Fordham and Ogbu^{lxxxii} believe that schools should develop programs and offer counselling to help students learn to divorce academic pursuit from the idea of 'acting white', others suggest that schools need to create environments that value and appreciate cultural differences and recognise education as a process that takes place both within formal institutions as well as within families and communities.^{lxxxiii} Such advocates argue that mechanisms need to be established for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of all groups but particularly the oppressed and disadvantaged.^{lxxxiii} Similarly, success at school 'needs to be redefined to incorporate the lives and experiences of currently marginalised and materially excluded groups'.^{lxxxiv} It would seem, then, that at least four ideals should govern the experience of students in classrooms. First, schooling should value and add to students' existing cultural repertoires. Second, it should value and give voice to who students are, as they identify themselves. Third, schooling should value and promote all students' participation in decision-making. And fourth, it should consult and involve parents and communities in its educative processes. We consider each of these positive classroom experiences in turn.

Schooling should value and add to students' existing cultural repertoires

One way to contest the disempowering effects of the hegemonic curriculum is for schools to embrace the notion of multiple knowledges that are equally valid and embark on a strategy that Bob Connell refers to as *inverting* hegemony.^{lxxxv} Connell's intent is to reconstruct the mainstream curriculum by incorporating content and pedagogy in ways that build on the interests and perspectives of the least advantaged in a program of common learning in schools. Curricula and pedagogies that take seriously this notion of student voice, build on and add to the diverse experiences and knowledges that students bring to the classroom.^{lxxxvi} Instead of being a site of 'disjunction and dislocation',^{lxxxvii} there should be transparent links between the classroom and the world beyond, with schools becoming an extension of home language and literacy practices by confirming 'the language forms, modes of reasoning, dispositions, and histories that give students an active voice in defining the world'.^{lxxxviii}

By relating school curricula to children's worlds, not only is the classroom made more inclusive by legitimating locally produced knowledge but students can see their everyday lives and experiences as relevant to their learning and success at school. Clearly, it is the role of teachers and schools to encourage and assist students to draw on their cultural experiences in order to succeed academically.^{lxxxix} Heath^{xc} recommends interaction with parents and involvement with community paraprofessionals as a place for teachers to begin to learn about these communities and their practices. This enables teachers to re-evaluate their school curricula and learning environments and modify these to acknowledge and respond to the needs and interests of the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities they serve. But rather than teachers simply modifying their approach to fit the qualities or skills possessed by minority children, it is also important that a socially just curriculum equips students with 'the best of what contemporary society has to offer',^{xcii} complex collections of practices that make up the cultural capital valued by dominant groups. In this way, learning can open up ways of transforming the situation of the marginalised, equipping them with understandings that can empower them to act individually and together to improve their circumstances^{xciii} and to lead fulfilled lives. The point is not to eliminate the cultural capital that students bring with them to school or use it to limit their potential, but rather to add other cultural capital to their repertoires.^{xciii}

Schooling should value and give voice to who students are, as they identify themselves

While effective schooling promotes the valuing of voices and experiences that students bring to the classroom, it also calls for appreciation and respect for individual students, evidenced in teacher-student relationships and characterised by active trust and mutual respect. Such relationships are made possible when there is positive regard for social difference and when social groups are recognised for who they are, as they identify themselves.^{xciv} This recognition of difference or 'democratic cultural pluralism'^{xcv} is linked to improving the academic outcomes of underachieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds.^{xcvi} At the classroom level, it requires teachers to create opportunities to get to know their students, and for students to get to know themselves and to get to know and get along with 'the other' on the basis of who they are.^{xcvii}

The positive relationships and strong teacher-student rapport that ideally ensue from such practices have been found to have a positive influence on educational outcomes.^{xcviii} Sammons et al.^{xcix} also found positive effects when teachers showed interest in and communicated enthusiasm to children as individuals. Teacher-student relationships can also be enhanced outside the classroom. Studies of secondary schools in the UK¹ have demonstrated that shared teacher and student out-of-school activities have led to improved educational outcomes, as well as interpersonal openness and mutual understanding in their relationships.²

Schooling should value and promote all students' participation in decision-making

Knight³ has also found a sense of competence, a feeling of belonging and a sense of ownership central to student achievement. Having an active role in the life of the school is a key part of this. While Knight⁴ concedes that no teacher can walk into a classroom and instantly transform it into a democracy, every teacher can take meaningful steps toward making the class more democratic by bringing students into decision-making processes and moving in the direction of negotiable authority. Indeed, Connell⁵ suggests that to teach well in disadvantaged schools requires a shift towards more negotiated curriculum and more participatory classroom practices. Although the social skills developed will be of benefit to students in the world beyond schooling, studies in the UK have also shown enhanced behavioural and academic outcomes as a result of giving students positions of responsibility in the school system.⁶ While conveying trust in students' abilities and, therefore, improving the teacher-student relationship, such practices give students greater control over what happens to them at school.

Despite these findings, teachers and schools more often than not underestimate the potential of students to participate in discussions about what happens in their schools. Consultation with students over issues can be tokenistic or students are left out of the dialogue completely.⁷ Students are not ignorant of this. The contradictions, for example, 'of requiring students to sit, by compulsion not choice, in classrooms in which they have little input or control, while we attempt to teach them to think for themselves and to participate in decision-making are clearly evident'.⁸ Student councils are often promoted as forums in which to pursue such agendas; as places that give students opportunities to experience representative democracy firsthand. However, Schmuck and Schmuck's⁹ research in schools in small districts in the US did not find one school in which the student council had a discernible effect on aspects of school life other than entertainment and social events. Elected student leaders felt that they had very little influence over school operations and in most small districts student councils were slammed as 'perfunctory and pallid sham[s] of representative democracy'.¹⁰ One possible explanation for this might be that when students do have a voice in such forums, this is seen as only reflecting the dominant voices within the school. That is, the student voices invited and listened to might simply be those that reflect the views of powerful groups; students who possess the social and cultural capital already valued by the school.¹¹

Schooling should consult and involve parents and local communities in its educative processes

Involving parents and local communities in schooling presents its own challenges. In disadvantaged schools in particular, forging strong relationships between the school and its surrounding communities can be extremely difficult.¹² There are several reasons for this and it would be wrong to assume that 'working-class parents can simply be inculcated into what is essentially a bourgeois school culture in the relatively easy way in which middle-class parents are able to'.¹³ Nevertheless, teachers tend to take parental performance in schooling very seriously. Many teachers actively solicit parent participation, see their requests of parents as reasonable and often assume that all parents, regardless of social and economic position, can help their children.¹⁴ In fact, in the schools studied in Lareau's¹⁵ research, teachers' methods of presenting, teaching, and assessing subject matter were based on a structure that presumed parents would help children at home.

However, while there are variations within as well as between social classes, many working-class parents feel that they lack the culturally valuable educational skills and material resources to participate effectively in the educational process.¹⁶ Although they may be willing to help with their children's education, their unfamiliarity with the tasks being asked of them means that they may have few ideas about how to provide this help and are, therefore, reluctant to comply with school requests. Further, the limited time and disposable income of some lower and working-class parents make it difficult to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, often have educational skills and occupational prestige matching or surpassing that of teachers and have the necessary economic resources to more fully contribute to their children's schooling.¹⁷

Moreover, in much the same way that parents depend on doctors to heal their children, some working-class communities turn over responsibility for their child's education to 'professionals'.¹⁸ These parents see education as a discrete process that takes place on the school grounds under the direction of a teacher.¹⁹ Whereas, middle-class parents in Lareau's²⁰ study saw education as 'a shared enterprise and scrutinized, monitored, and supplemented the school experience of their children' by reading to them, initiating contact with teachers and attending school events. These parents, with similar or superior educational skills and occupational prestige levels to teachers, conceived of schooling as a partnership between equals and saw it as their responsibility to reinforce, monitor, and supervise the educational experience of their children.²¹ In short, working-class and middle-class parents often have different conceptions of the division of labour with respect to schooling their children.

Others trace unequal levels of parental involvement in schooling back to educational institutions, which are sometimes accused of making middle-class families feel more welcome than working-class and lower-class families.²² This latter group of parents are also more likely to have had negative experiences as students

themselves, and may already experience feelings of insecurity and intimidation in school settings.²³ This makes community participation in disadvantaged schools via conventional channels difficult.²⁴ Those who are unwilling or unable to become involved face marginalisation and risk being labelled as ‘ignorant but also neglectful of their duty to their child and to the nation’.²⁵ Moreover, the lack of participation on the part of subordinate groups leaves the door wide open for dominant groups – who are equipped with the cultural capital legitimated by educational institutions – to mobilise class advantage and lobby for their own agenda.²⁶

To add to these difficulties, many parents and teachers share a long history of tension and mistrust. They have even been described in the literature as ‘natural enemies’,²⁷ facing enduring problems of negotiating ‘boundaries’ between their ‘territories’.²⁸ According to Briggs and Potter,²⁹ teachers have had negative attitudes about parents and parent participation, and have claimed that parents are apathetic and come to school only to criticise. Hence, attempts to develop participation programs to bring the school and its communities closer together are often ineffective and frustrating to both parents and teachers.³⁰ One reason for this is that they do not equally share decision-making. Instead, parents have traditionally adopted the role of supporters or representatives, rather than full and equal partners.³¹

In these ways, parents (particularly those with backgrounds different from teachers) are often positioned in a binary relationship with teachers, as ‘others’. Parental knowledge of the child is seen as anecdotal, subjective, ad hoc, individualised and applicable only to specific children. On the other hand, teachers’ professional knowledge is seen as developmental, scientific, objective, norm-referenced and applicable to all children. Hence, parental knowledge is often characterised as inadequate (they are regarded as ignorant about what and how to teach their children), supplementary (and can therefore be ignored by teachers without their professional standards being compromised), and/or unimportant. In fact, many staff have little incentive to collaborate with parents, given that their claim to be professionals is seen by some to be undermined by giving credence to parental knowledge of the child. This frustrates the creation of equitable parent-teacher relationships.³²

Clearly, some schools should think differently about what they expect from families and communities.³³ Parents should be viewed as partners, and the vital role that they play in education recognised. Rather than seeking to determine what parents can do for teachers – such as filling a variety of unpaid teacher aide or custodial roles – teachers need to implement initiatives that recognise the complementary roles of parents and teachers and bring schools and communities closer together.³⁴ Schools also need to engage with community concerns³⁵ and reach out to parents in new ways, as parents without money or status are often wary or uncertain about approaching teachers and administrators.³⁶ Schools should help parents connect to resources, create environments where parents feel welcome, and organise various avenues for participation.³⁷ In this way, positive relationships with school communities could be established and maintained and community representatives drawn into the process of educational decision-making.

HOW AND BY WHOM SHOULD SCHOOLS BE MANAGED?

Although schools were once ‘fortress-like’ institutions with the purposes of education departments carried out ‘by principals and teachers with little negotiation with, and input from, school communities, including parents’,³⁸ there were efforts in the latter part of the twentieth century to devolve decision-making to schools and to experiment with more open and participatory relationships with parents and school communities. Devolution, as it was first implemented in Australian schools in the early 1970s, was strongly influenced by the Karmel Report.³⁹ Karmel’s socially democratic agenda stressed the importance of bottom-up reforms and decision-making.⁴⁰ The need for ‘more teacher and school level professional autonomy, combined with greater input from parents and community’⁴¹ was championed as giving schools and communities increased power to manage their own affairs and improving educational outcomes for all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The ideal of devolution (with various hues) has now been widely accepted in Australian education. However, it is a socially democratic view of devolution that provides real opportunities for people to participate in decision-making and, in so doing, have a say in how their lives are governed. It also suggests a closer association between school and communities. Many teachers and parents are committed to a democratic version of devolution, believing that education can and should be a collective social activity, inextricably tied to communities.⁴² Drawing on such a view, we argue for at least two ideals. First, that schooling should democratise its leadership structures to include teachers and, second, that it should democratise its participation structures to include parents and communities.

Schooling should democratise its leadership structures to include teachers

Educational institutions have long existed as closed systems with top-down structures, ‘characterized by rigidity, extensive rules and regulations, and excessively tight norms that restrict creativity’.⁴³ While visionary leadership in an organisation is important, there is no evidence to suggest that the principal is necessarily the best and/or should be its only source. Instead, the effective schools literature suggests that effective principals provide or cause others to provide strong leadership.⁴⁴ The traditional, entrenched orthodoxy of principals as primary decision-makers needs to be challenged and the leadership role extended to many individuals and

groups in a participatory style of management.⁴⁵ Vision is not the preserve and prerogative of those occupying designated leadership positions. Indeed, the sharing of leadership and the involvement more generally of teachers in decision-making is often recognised as helping teachers become more efficacious and contribute more productively to schools.⁴⁶

However, the empowerment of teachers may not come easily or quickly. Many teachers have been conditioned to accept dependent roles and the culture of schools reinforces this trend.⁴⁷ Others are skeptical about the motives and sincerity of administrators when it comes to empowerment. Indeed, Whitaker and Moses⁴⁸ suggest that a willingness to enfranchise teachers is lacking. While principals now tend to embrace and endorse the idea of participation, their behaviour – their controlling values and tendencies – can sometimes suggest otherwise.⁴⁹ Some teachers suspect that their collegial energies may be harnessed less for the purpose of giving them a say than to ‘squeeze out dissenting voices and secure commitment and compliance to changes imposed by others’.⁵⁰

As the front-line workers in schools, teachers are often expected to implement policies but not make them. Hence, they can often regard themselves as the ‘objects of policy interventions rather than as the authors of social change’.⁵¹ But rather than their input being included as a token gesture, teachers should be centrally involved in the design of reform strategies.⁵² For this to happen, and as a first step, they need to become full partners in their own profession.⁵³ Participation in collaborative decisions affecting their profession, their classrooms, and their students challenges top-down structures while teachers’ ownership and endorsement of decisions fosters feelings of empowerment. Involving in the decision-making process those who will be responsible for implementation, appears to impact on their motivation to act upon and commit to the intended outcomes.⁵⁴

This is a central premise of the most recent school reform movement in Queensland, the New Basics Project,⁵⁵ which ‘seeks to foreground teachers’ knowledge, teachers’ professional development and the creation of school learning communities as a way to align the three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment⁵⁶ at the school site’.⁵⁷ It is a reaction to much previous educational reform – done to, rather than with teachers – which considers the importance of bringing teachers back into educational restructuring as central to improving student outcomes.⁵⁸

Schooling should democratise its participation structures to include parents and communities

Schools play a crucial role in the formation of democracy. However, ‘democratization *in* the school is not necessarily the same as democratization *of* the school’.⁵⁹ Given that the ‘notion of “democracy” implies collective decision-making on major issues in which all citizens have, in principle, an equal voice’,⁶⁰ *all* those involved in schooling need to be involved in determining schooling’s purposes. Clearly, ‘you cannot have a democracy in which some citizens only *receive* decisions made by others’.⁶¹

Providing all members of the school community with access to forms of self-determination certainly requires an investment of time, energy and emotion. Nevertheless, within a context of participative democracy, Wheeler and Agruso⁶² see the development of collaborative relationships among teachers, students, parents and the schools’ communities as crucial in ensuring success in schooling for disadvantaged students. In part, this is because when decisions are more relevant to those they affect, schools are able to provide a more appropriate education for all students. As well, such ‘devolution of power has the potential to reduce alienation from schools, increase job satisfaction of employees, promote direct participation of all relevant groups, and raise community understanding’.⁶³ This is apart from the fact that ‘the rule of some people over others, their power to make decisions that affect the actions and conditions of action of others’⁶⁴ is hardly democratic. The delegation of authority to some who are charged with making decisions in an ‘impartial’ manner can legitimate undemocratic, authoritarian structures of decision-making.

Giddens⁶⁵ refers to an alternative response characterised by ‘generative politics’. In the context of schooling, this ‘allow[s] individuals and groups to *make things happen*, rather than have things happen to them’⁶⁶ and opens up the processes of schooling to groups that traditionally have been excluded, by seriously engaging their views in decision-making. A governance structure supporting decision-making practices in concert with the entire school community also assumes more flexible leadership that enables participants to ‘exercise the power of their human agency in self-determining ways’.⁶⁷ The shift and subsequent change in roles and responsibilities affords all members of the school community with opportunity for increased involvement that leads to a sense of ownership of school reform and control over the school agenda. These opportunities to be involved in collaborative decisions that affect schooling and, therefore, the lives of their children, empower families and assign value to all members of a school’s community.

CONCLUSION

In casting a critical eye over the effective schooling literature, we do not mean to suggest that schooling practices short of our ideals are necessarily inappropriate. We are still concerned to detail what we regard as

socially just forms of schooling – and therein lies measures of what we regard as appropriate ends – but we also want to engage with matters related to how well these ends are pursued. Hence, while there might be agreement that schools should ideally equip students with the intellectual, cultural and social capital necessary to pursue a wide range of post-school opportunities, whether these capabilities and opportunities are distributed differentially or equitably is a key question.⁶⁸ If we are to take the conditions of recognitive justice seriously, it remains important for all schools to move beyond the goal of ‘compensation’ and towards the reorganisation of the cultural content of schooling if they are to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students.⁶⁹

Drawing on current research and scholarship, we have argued that such reorganisation necessarily entails modifying both teachers’ pedagogies and school curricula, and adopting organisational styles that reconfigure teacher-student and school-community relations based on an appreciation and respect for individuals, as they identify themselves. As part of this agenda we have also argued for the devolution of decision-making in schools, in ways that promote open and participatory relationships among teachers, students, parents and school communities. That is, all those affected by school and classroom decisions need to be included in the decision-making process, particularly the voices of the least advantaged. Moving away from the principal as the primary decision-maker to a participatory style of management is courageous work, as we have noted. The same is true for teachers who attempt to move away from their traditional positions as gatekeepers of legitimate knowledge. However, to maintain the status quo, to do nothing apart from tinker at the edges of schooling with compensatory programs that regard difference as a deficiency, is to continue the current reproduction of educational disadvantage across generations.⁷⁰ Surely this is not what we mean or want to mean by effective schooling. In this article we have identified broad principles for socially just schooling. The next step, then, is for practical, workable strategies, guided by these principles, to be explored in specific contexts.

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