IMPLICATIONS OF THE MY SCHOOL WEBSITE FOR DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES:

A BOURDIEUIAN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Drawing on the theoretical constructs of Pierre Bourdieu, this article explores implications of the Australian My School website for schools located in disadvantaged communities. These implications flow from the legitimisation of certain cultural practices through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage and the resulting reproduction of social and cultural inequalities. While Bourdieu has often been (mis)represented as a determinist, seeing transformative potential in his theoretical constructs, the article also suggests possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of students in disadvantaged communities. A transformation of the field – incorporating ways to ‘redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172) – is central to this.

Introduction

In the name of transparency, the results of standardised, mandatory, nation-wide literacy and numeracy tests undertaken in Australia have been published on the Federal Government’s My School website (ACARA, 2010) since its launch in January, 2010. This yearly regime of nation-wide, full-cohort standardised testing at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 is known as NAPLAN (National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy) and is conducted in all schools and school systems in Australia. Scores achieved by schools in each of the five test domains (Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation, and Numeracy) are publicly available on the website, which was Prime Minister Gillard’s signature reform as the then education minister in the Rudd Labor government.

While the current education minister, Peter Garrett, suggested that the launch of the second iteration of the My School website on March 4, 2011, was ‘a great day for Australian parents’, this may not be the case for all Australian parents. In the supposed interest of information starved parents and of Australia more broadly as ‘the clever country’ in pursuit of quality education, the website is purported to provide accurate information allowing parents to compare their child’s school with other schools of a similar profile and arm them with information that will enable them to do two main things: (i) select a school for their child; and (ii) put pressure on the principal to improve the school’s NAPLAN results.

This article draws on the theoretical tools of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, to explore implications of the My School website for schools located in disadvantaged communities in these two areas. According to Wacquant (2002), Bourdieu’s theory and politics are best described as a ‘toolkit’ ‘aimed at posing scientifically those fruitful questions which, by tearing the veil of taken-for-grantedness, enable us to see the social world, and ourselves, with new eyes’ (p. 177). Within the field of education, Bourdieu and those who employ his theoretical constructs help us to better understand the role that schools and school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities and legitimising certain cultural practices through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage (Bourdieu, 1998b). While Bourdieu has often been (mis)represented as a determinist (see, for example, Nash (1990); Jenkins (2002)), seeing transformative potential in his theoretical constructs, the article concludes by suggesting possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of students in disadvantaged communities. A transformation of the field – incorporating ways to ‘redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172) – is central to this.
‘Voting with their feet’: Residualisation in disadvantaged communities

In 2008 at the National Press Club, then Prime Minister Rudd was asked: ‘If parents find out that their school is not performing well, won’t they do the rational thing: vote with their feet and leave?’ Mr Rudd replied: ‘We would make no apology for that. The whole idea is to make sure that schools are accountable for their performance. And part of accountability means that the parents and the students know how that school is performing against agreed standards’ (Preston, 2010, pp. 27-28). Proponents of the My School website argue that it provides parents with information on which to base their choice of school. The underlying assumption is that parents, depicted here as consumers, should ‘shop around for schools as though they are consumer items like plasma TVs, thus creating the impression that education is a commodity rather than a public good’ (Reid, 2010, p. 8). However, not all parents are in a position to choose a school for their child. Often lacking the economic capital (or economic resources they have access to) to act on their ‘right to choose’, parents living in disadvantaged communities are less likely to be able to shop around for schools if they are unhappy with My School results. Put simply, choice is limited to those with the economic capital required to pay for school fees, transportation costs, or relocation to another area for those who wish to send their child to a zoned government school (Reid, 2010).

Others use the information to remove their children from ‘underperforming’ schools, contributing to a chain reaction that can lead to schools becoming unsustainable (Cooper, 2009/2010). It is students from the most advantaged backgrounds who are most likely to move; a case made clearly in the emerging issues paper submitted to the Australian federal government’s commissioned Review of Funding for Schooling, chaired by businessman David Gonski (see DEEWR, 2010). Chris Bonnor, a former head of the New South Wales Secondary Principals Council, wrote one of the 7000 submissions drawn upon by the final report (DEEWR, 2011). This submission highlighted the role that fee charging plays in attracting a significant resource for schools: a greater share of socially and academically advantaged student enrolments. Acting as an enrolment discriminator, the charging of fees defines who gets a choice and which schools they can choose. It has led Independent and public selective schools to boast an increasing share of the most socio-economically advantaged students while schools with low socio-economic status are enrolling a greater proportion of the most disadvantaged students (Bonnor, 2011).

Using information from the 2006 and 1996 Australian censuses, Barbara Preston (2010) has shown that the ratio between low- and high-income families in schools has indeed changed from an average of thirteen low-income for every ten high-income students in our public secondary schools in 1996 to sixteen for every ten in 2006. The opposite trend occurred in private schools. Moreover, ‘irrespective of family income, more than 80% of primary and secondary students living in districts in the lowest SES decile attend public schools’ (Preston, 2010, p. 30). This uneven (re)distribution of engaged and achieving students and the concomitant pooling of disadvantaged students in low socio-economic schools has created widening gaps in the social and academic profiles of Australian schools (Bonnor, 2011; DEEWR, 2011).

It is difficult to argue against socially ambitious parents who opt for their children to mix with ‘socially more desirable’ students in selective or semi-selective government schools or the private system. The most recent data from the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that regardless of their own socioeconomic background, students attending schools
with a socioeconomically advantaged intake tend to perform better than those attending schools with more disadvantaged peers (see OECD, 2010b; Perry & McConney, 2010). In the majority of OECD countries, the impact of a school’s socioeconomic status on students’ educational outcomes far outweighs the effects of the individual student’s own socioeconomic background (DEEWR, 2011; MCEEDYA, 2011). This ‘neighbourhood effect’ means that the importance of the composition of a school’s student population cannot be underestimated.

The exodus of middle class students has led to a dramatic residualisation effect, converting schools in low SES areas into ‘shadows of their former selves’ (Lamb, 2007, p. 18). In a process described as ‘ghettoization’, disadvantaged schools are left with higher concentrations of ‘pupils who [come] from impoverished, and in some cases, chaotic, backgrounds, many of whom [have] already fallen way behind academically before they [enter] the schools’ (Spooner, 1998, p. 145).

What is important to note here is that the capacity of parents to seek out and enrol their children in higher socioeconomic status schools is determined by their location, mobility, access to information and networks and family income. The consequence is that ‘differences in educational outcomes’ are very considerably ‘the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions’ (DEEWR, 2010, p. 5).

A Bourdieuian reading of this situation must begin with an understanding of capital. While capital is any resource effective in a given social arena that enables one to appropriate the specific profits arising out of participation and contest in it (Bourdieu, 1986), the notion of cultural capital ‘includes such things as acquired knowledge (educational or otherwise), cultural codes, manner of speaking and consumption practices and so forth, which are embodied as a kind of “habitus” in the individual and are also objectified in cultural goods’ (Bullen & Kenway, 2005, p. 52).

The cultural capital or the ‘expected behaviours, expected language competencies, the explicit and implicit values, knowledge, attitudes to and relationship with academic culture required for success in school are all competencies which one class brings with them to school’ (Henry, Knight, Lingard & Taylor, 1988, p. 233). Yet, ‘the school assumes middle-class culture, attitudes and values in all its pupils. Any other background, however rich in experiences, often turns out to be a liability’ (Henry et al., 1988, p. 142-43; emphasis added). That is:

we do not enter fields with equal amounts, or identical configurations, of capital … Some individuals, therefore, already possess quantities of relevant capital … which makes them better players than others in certain field games. Conversely, some are disadvantaged. (Grenfell & James, 1998a, p. 21)

My School attests to the supposed gifts of students endowed with the cultural capital of the dominant and ensures the continuing profitability of such capital. Educational differences can be ‘misrecognised’ as the result of ‘individual giftedness’ rather than class-based differences, ignoring the fact that the abilities measured by scholastic criteria (such as NAPLAN) often stem from ‘the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 22).

Such misrecognition in the education system wields a particularly pernicious form of what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998a) through ‘an arbitrary curriculum that is “naturalized”'
so that social classifications are transformed into academic ones’ (Grenfell & James, 1998a, pp. 23-24). Specifically, Bourdieu would name this power to dominate disadvantaged groups symbolic power, and the exercise of it, symbolic violence. A power or capital becomes symbolic, or endowed with a specifically symbolic efficacy, by being ‘misrecognized in their arbitrary truth as capital and recognized as legitimate’ (Bourdieu, 1990, emphasis original, p. 112) and therefore able to exert a specific effect of domination by being known and recognised in a field. The acknowledged value status of these capitals as legitimate under the My School regime ‘is a recognition which maintains and reproduces a strict hierarchy to the advantage, and disadvantage, of factions within it’ (Grenfell & James, 1998a, p. 23). The terms ‘recognition’ (reconnaissance) and ‘misrecognition’ (méconnaissance) here underscore the fact that:

The exercise of power through symbolic exchange always rests on a foundation of shared belief. That is, the efficacy of symbolic power presupposes certain forms of cognition or belief, in such a way that even those who benefit least from the exercise of power participate, to some extent, in their own subjection. They recognize or tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of power, or of the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded; and hence fail to see that the hierarchy is, after all, an arbitrary social construction which serves the interests of some groups more than others. To understand the nature of symbolic power, it is therefore crucial to see that it presupposes a kind of active complicity on the part of those subjected to it. Dominated individuals are not passive bodies to which symbolic power is applied … Rather, symbolic power requires, as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it. (Thompson, 1991, pp. 22-23, emphasis original)

For students from disadvantaged communities who may be lacking the variety of cultural capital highly valued in the schooling system yet believe in its legitimacy, the importance of time in company with those who have this cannot be overstated. Cultural capital cannot be transmitted instantaneously; its accumulation requires an investment, above all of time. It is exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups that is necessary for success at school and yet for many students, access to dominant forms of cultural capital is limited.

With market forces moving the more ‘desirable’ pupils out of particular schools, and other schools taking in larger numbers of those children considered ‘undesirable’ (Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1996), it appears that ‘well-resourced choosers now have free reign to guarantee and reproduce, as best they can, their existing cultural, social and economic advantages in the new complex and blurred hierarchy of schools’ (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995, p. 23). Whether this decision to leave reflects an understanding of the importance of time in company with those who are also likely to experience success at school, the end result is reduced opportunities for students from marginalised groups to access and accumulate the cultural capital of dominant groups.

When educational abilities measured by scholastic criteria are related to familiarity with bourgeois culture rather than individual talent, this limited access for the marginalised to the knowledges, values and attitudes of the dominant further reduces their chances of success on this unfair playing field (see Mills (2007)).
Pressing the principal? Detrimental effects on pedagogies and curricula

At the press conference launching *My School* 2.0 at Telopea Park School in Canberra on 4th March, 2011, education Minister Peter Garrett, said:

I think the great thing about My School 2.0 is that it opens up the conversation between parents and schools. And this is one that principals and schools will welcome, and it’s one that I really, really encourage to take place. We’ve all got an interest in making sure that kids get the best education possible but, for parents, it’s absolutely central. So I would say to them, ‘Go and have that discussion with your school principal.’ The principal will welcome that discussion, and it’s one that will inevitably lead to a really good engagement on issues of education that the parents have identified. (Garrett, 2011)

Arming parents with information to enable them to put pressure on the principal to improve the school’s NAPLAN results is a second intended outcome of the *My School* website. But this aim is undermined by and oblivious to the reality that some parents are unwilling or unable to participate in schooling and would be far from comfortable setting foot on school grounds (see Mills & Gale, 2004), let alone ‘pressuring the principal’ regarding curriculum content. While middle-class parents – who are equipped with the cultural capital legitimated by educational institutions – often have educational skills and occupational prestige matching or surpassing that of teachers and are more comfortable engaging with professionals, others lack the culturally valued educational skills necessary to participate effectively in the educational process (Lareau, 1989).

Nonetheless, the expectation, it seems, is that pressure from parents will result in teachers earnestly teaching for the NAPLAN test in an effort to improve individual school and state results. However, little in the way of improvement seems to have resulted, with outcomes for students in lower socioeconomic status schools and communities worsening since the inception of the website (Bonnor, 2011). Moreover, pressure to ‘improve standards’ has seen negative effects on pedagogies and curricula in Australia just as they have in the UK and US where such damaging trends have been observed after the publication of performance data (Lingard, 2010). The literacy and numeracy tests that underpin the *My School* website have quickly become high-stakes, with schools responding to pressure by neglecting those areas of the curriculum which are not being tested.

Pressure is being placed on teachers to increase the pace of teaching and learning, with coverage – superficial fast learning aimed at improved test scores, irrespective of whether or not the tests are valid or reliable – taking precedence over deep understanding (Wrigley, Lingard & Thomson, 2012). As Lingard (2010) notes, an ‘uninformed systemic prescription’ from above and mistrust of teachers and schools who are forced to stick to standardised lesson plans and drop creative approaches (Cooper, 2009/2010) are likely outcomes of these high-stakes tests and consequential accountability. This narrowing of the curriculum and move towards defensive and scripted rather than productive pedagogies should be cause for major concern for all involved in schools serving low-SES communities, who ‘risk offering working-class, cultural and linguistic minority students ... an enacted curriculum of basic skills, rule recognition and compliance’ (Luke, 2010, p. 180; cited in Lingard, 2010). Such narrowing ‘will not produce the sorts of outcomes now deemed necessary for a globalised knowledge economy’ (Lingard, 2010, p. 131) and disadvantages students further in education and labour markets.
In the US, test results are being used to select schools for closure. Handed over to charter operators, these publically funded but privately operated schools focus on ‘teaching to the test’ and have sprung up in the most disadvantaged areas of the country (Cogan, 2011). It is little surprise, then, that Australian schools are responding to NAPLAN testing and the publication of results on the My School website by throwing up smokescreens in order to hide problems that confront them and trying to ensure ‘success’ by manipulating the process, such as excluding certain children from tests (Reid, 2010), in efforts to avoid the sanctions that may flow from poor results.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, a focus on ‘teaching to the test’ and the inevitable narrowing of curricula that follows in schools works to further the disadvantage of students from non-dominant backgrounds. As Thomson’s (2002) study of disadvantaged schools in post-industrial areas of suburban Adelaide, Australia, demonstrates, education policy focused on narrow educational outcomes (spelling, reading, writing) serves to reinforce students’ disadvantage as they are offered a narrower rather than a wider, more challenging, curriculum.

For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the species of capital, or more specifically the volume and structure of capital they hold, is not highly valued in schools. In addition, those who bring cultural background that is closest to the orthodox school culture will have ‘a whole set of productive and receptive schemes of thought and valuing which will render the pedagogic process less problematic. The reverse is also true’ (Grenfell & James, 1998b, pp. 164-165). As Delpit (1997) argues, 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 (Bernstein, 1990). Paradoxically, many students from marginalised backgrounds recognise the legitimate norms in others without having practical operational knowledge of it themselves: ‘the dominated classes, and in particular the petit-bourgeois are condemned to reconnaissance without connaissance’ (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1975, p. 8; cited in Grenfell & James, 1998a).

Teachers play a key role in the process of accumulation of dominant cultural capital for students who possess such capital ‘in the wrong currency’ (see Mills, 2007). In any sphere of activity, ‘the defining principles are only ever partially articulated, and much of the orthodox way of thinking and acting passes in an implicit, tacit manner. Thus, the legitimate is never made fully explicit’ (Grenfell & James, 1998a, p. 20). Delpit (1997) would argue that teachers can make a difference for these students by using visible pedagogic models: taking nothing for granted and making explicit the rules of that culture through examples, illustrations and narratives that facilitate the acquisition of school knowledge. Bernstein (1990) 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’ (Delpit, 1997, p. 585).

For schools in disadvantaged communities to make a difference in this way, relating curricula to students’ worlds is a central task. That is, schools and teachers need to create an environment that values and appreciates cultural differences and recognises the cultural symbols that are important to their students. By ensuring that there are transparent links between the classroom and the world
beyond, teachers and schools can encourage and assist students to draw on their cultural experiences in order to succeed academically (Gale & Densmore, 2000). What we are witnessing instead under the My School and NAPLAN regime are schools that are little more than sites of ‘disjunction and dislocation’ for their most disadvantaged students (Comber & Hill, 2000). Narrowed curricula works to illegitimate locally produced knowledge and leaves students little possibility of acquiring the cultural capital that ironically could improve school NAPLAN results.

However, if teachers were to broaden the types of cultural capital valued in the classroom, it would be possible for them to act as agents of transformation rather than reproduction. That is, through their curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, 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. (Giroux, 1990, p. 91)

Ways forward: A transformation of the field

While negative implications of the My School website for schools in disadvantaged communities in Australia have been illustrated in this article, increased transparency brought about by the publishing of the controversial website has the potential to be advantageous if it creates a political groundswell for change. For a government that genuinely desires an educational transformation, low NAPLAN results could be a catalyst for an important educational shift. If we confront the data published on the My School website honestly and face up to its challenges, there are possibilities for schools and teachers to improve the educational outcomes of students in disadvantaged communities. A transformation of the field – incorporating ways to ‘redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172) – is central to this.

It may be pertinent at this point, however, to acknowledge that those involved in reproducing the social order often do so without either knowing they are doing so or wanting to do so. Indeed, the injustices of ‘allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society’ (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). Hence, the implicit demands of the educational system ‘maintain the preexisting order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 20), ‘behind the backs’ of actors engaged in the school system – teachers, students and their parents – and often against their will (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

There are several challenges ahead if we are to improve the educational outcomes of our most disadvantaged students in the My School era. The first challenge is to buck the trend of the narrowing of curricula in schools and instead work to broaden it by teaching the academic skills and competencies required to enable disadvantaged students to succeed in mainstream societies, while also ensuring that this content acknowledges and responds to the needs and interests of the communities they serve. Political philosophers such as Nancy Fraser and Iris Marion Young conceptualise this ‘as a tension between an impulse toward redistribution of power-elite capital on one hand; and, on the other hand, toward recognition and valuation of diverse social-cultural identity formations’ (Zipin, 2005, p. 2; emphasis original). Keddie (2006) suggests that such ‘radical
re-envisionings of curriculum and pedagogy … might work to dismantle and transform the inequitable power relations and underlying frameworks that generate … injustice within and beyond the contexts of education’ (p. 21).

A second challenge relates to the differentiated system of schools currently present in Australia. PISA results demonstrate that systems that show high performance and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes tend not to be differentiated (see OECD, 2010a) but comprehensive, requiring teachers and schools to embrace diverse student populations. Given that one of the most critical resources in creating advantage and disadvantage is the collective enrollment of students in a school and the cultural capital they bring to the educational context, an obvious solution to the compounding of underachievement in low socioeconomic status schools that we are currently witnessing – created by the pooling of disadvantaged students in some schools – is to create a far more balanced enrollment profile across all of our schools. This would enable every student to have the opportunity to learn with and have greater access to higher-achieving peers: in Bourdieuan terms, those who possess the cultural capital of dominant groups.

This would be a hard sell to political groups seeking the votes of parents who in turn are seeking an advantage for their children in higher socioeconomic status schools. Bonnor (2011) suggests that such a proposal implies the necessity of a new schools funding model that would support disadvantaged schools to make them attractive to all families. Central to this is a need to prioritise placement of the best possible teachers – supported in ways that improve their odds, and their students’ odds, of success (Bonnor, 2011) – with the lowest-performing students. As Lingard (2010) points out:

there has been a failure to recognise that it is the quality of teacher classroom practices that count most in terms of school effects upon student learning and especially in relation to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recognition of the importance of teacher classroom practices demands informed prescription at the policy centre, working with a culture of trust and respect of teachers and full support for teachers to develop and practise their professional judgements. In other words: the quality of classroom practices is what counts, that is, if one holds student social class background constant the most significant ‘determining’ factor in student performance is teacher practices. (p. 139)

If the intention of the Australian Labor government is to support equity of outcomes, the evolving framework of Australia’s schools – and the residualisation and narrowing of curricula in disadvantaged schools that flow on from the publication of NAPLAN results on the My School website – is undermining this intention. We need to reaffirm our commitment to equity of outcomes and revisit the role of inclusive schools in achieving this equity (Bonnor, 2011). Moreover, these schools must be replete with a culture of quality and high expectations, given that ‘low expectations and aspirations for student achievements are often endemic features of school cultures’ (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003, p. 131) in disadvantaged communities.

According to Grenfell and James (1998a), Bourdieu’s whole mission seems to be ‘to render visible these invisible operations as a way of making available the possibility at least of democratizing the product and processes of the field’ (p. 22). Seeing transformative potential in Bourdieu’s theoretical constructs, this article has similarly attempted to make visible unintended implications of the My School website for schools located in disadvantaged communities and shed light on ways that
schools and teachers can make a difference for marginalised students. What Bourdieu contributes to our understanding of the implications of My School, then, is an explanatory account of the ‘manifold processes whereby the social order masks its arbitrariness and perpetuates itself – by extorting from the subordinate practical acceptance of, if not willed consent to, its existing hierarchies’ (Wacquant, 1998a, p. 217). Misrecognition or méconnaissance ensures that ‘these underlying processes ... are not consciously acknowledged in terms of the social differentiation they perpetuate, often in the name of democracy and equality’ (Grenfell & James, 1998a, p. 22). Relations of domination are able to be established and maintained through strategies that are ‘softened and disguised, and which conceal domination beneath the veil of an enchanted relation’ (Thompson, 1991, pp. 23-24). This invisible power can only be exercised ‘with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it’ (Bourdieu, 1998a, p. 17).

However, this ‘account of symbolic violence – the imposition of systems of meaning that legitimize and thus solidify structures of inequality – simultaneously points to the social conditions under which these hierarchies can be challenged, transformed, nay overt urned’ (Wacquant, 1998, p. 217, emphasis original). That is, Bourdieu’s ‘relentless disclosure of power and privilege in its most varied and subtlest forms’ (Thompson, 1991, p. 31) is the first step in creating new social relations; alternative ways of organising social and political life (Thompson, 1991).

If we – as teachers, school administrators and policy makers – do not wish to contribute to the ‘reproductive struggle ... in which [dominated classes] are beaten before they start’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 168), it is high time that the academic failure of children from marginalised groups was recognised as ‘an indication of a deficiency on the part of the school to develop pedagogic practices responsive to the ... dispositions such children bring to school’ (Nash, 1990, p. 437). For those concerned about the educational outcomes of students from disadvantaged communities in the My School era, what is required is a transformation of the field to ‘redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172). Such transformation must entail providing:

our strongest support for low socioeconomic status students and schools by providing quality teachers, authentic school reform and organisation, an improved mix of students, and new learning opportunities. We can’t be sidetracked by forcing public schools, the ones that must cater for all students in all localities, into models of autonomy that don’t deliver and that may worsen equity of outcomes. (Bonnor, 2011)

A response to the reviewers and response papers

While the architects of NAPLAN and My School may agree in principle with the suggestions for transforming the field articulated in this article, whether they would consider implementing such change in practice is questionable. To break up the residualisation of schools serving poor communities and concomitant unfair advantage that students attending schools in higher income areas hold, currently excluded students from less advantaged suburbs could be ‘bused in’ to these schools. This would redefine the field by creating a far more socio-economically balanced enrolment profile and enable every student to have the opportunity to learn with and have greater access to peers who possess the cultural capital of dominant groups. However, such practice is likely to be fiercely resisted by those members of privileged groups who seek the greatest possible advantage for their child by harnessing their ability to ‘buy’ a place in elite private schools or secure housing in the area surrounding (and therefore gain entry into) advantaged zoned public schools.
As has been mentioned previously, the focus in this article has rested on negative implications of the *My School* website for schools in disadvantaged communities in Australia. However, this is not intended to suggest that there are no potential benefits for such communities. Indeed, increased transparency brought about by the publishing of the *My School* data has the potential to be advantageous if it creates a political groundswell for change. When issues related to inequalities in schooling are politicised, for example, interest from members of disadvantaged communities in the very real issues impacting on their children can result. If access to increased funding to generate improvement is a flow on effect, this also offers the potential for positive outcomes.

Empirical research that focuses upon delivering specific suggestions for responses to the mechanisms of symbolic violence and social reproduction that are described in this article must be our next step. However, these strategies also need to be conceptualised in the unique contexts in which the issues are located. That is, this article identifies principles to inform these strategies and beginning points for research that is cognisant of the uniqueness of specific educational contexts.

At the same time, I take Rasmussen’s point that it is not possible to agree on what constitutes justice in education. The very notion of teachers acting as agents of transformation rather than reproduction could be perceived as dangerously utopian given that teachers probably would not agree on what transformation looks like, let alone recognise that what they perceive as transformation is another form of reproduction. These are complex issues requiring complex (and multiple) context-dependent solutions.

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