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Teaching within and against the circle of privilege: Reforming teachers, reforming schools

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This paper argues that educators should learn from the emerging international evidence of failure over the past three decades of the neo-liberal education policy ensemble (Alexander, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Lingard, 2010). In the paper, I try to weave together a critique of neo-liberalism in education (drawing on the work of previous contributors to *JEP* among others) with an account of how certain types of people in certain types of communities are disadvantaged by what currently counts as education. I then look at how such processes of disadvantaging can possibly be turned around. The starting point for the argument is the unoriginal claim that schooling tends to privilege the culture and experience of mainly white, middle-class students and their families who occupy the normalized centre of what Choules (2007a) calls ‘the circle of privilege’, and who, like their teachers, tend to take existing social arrangements for granted. Despite the entrenched policy framework that seems to deny agency and push educators towards conservative, mandated educational practices, however, I show that some activist teachers continue to demonstrate that there are ways of working with schools, students, families and communities that can foster student engagement in powerful learning in the interests, particularly, of marginalised young people. The paper is an argument for asserting social and educational values within the education profession, for working with families and communities to provide better opportunities for young people, and to keep chipping away at the greater goal of achieving democratic schooling for social justice. It is about working in educational and political ways in schools and communities in the here-and-now to provide better recognition and opportunities for young people who are put at a disadvantage by the hardening of education policy, and by prevailing societal norms and power structures.

The critique of neo-liberalism that follows, the account of processes of educational disadvantaging and advantaging, and the argument for promoting social justice, are illustrated by data derived from two ethnographic research projects conducted by the author and other in Australia, in suburban localities (‘Wirra Warra’, ‘Bountiful Bay’ and ‘Greenfields’) characterised by low employment, high welfare dependency, poor health indicators and low school retention rates (see the extended reports in Smyth et al., 2008, 2009¹; and Angus et al., 2004²). Some illustrative data are also taken from an evaluation report, conducted by a colleague at the University of Ballarat (McGraw, 2011), of the *Connect*³ program - a local, alternative, second chance education program for young people returning to school after dropping out of formal schooling in the area of Wirra Warra, which is one of the localities of the research reported in Smyth et al. (2008, 2009), which also investigated the *Connect* program.

The neo-liberal framing of education

Education, in most countries, is framed to varying extents within a neo-liberal policy complex. The evidence is piling up, however, that three decades of neo-liberal educational experimentation has been a disaster in a number of countries

from a number of points of view, particularly in England (Alexander, 2009), the USA (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hursh, 2008), and Australia (Lingard, 2010). Even the once-fierce advocate of the US school testing regime, Dianne Ravich, has changed her mind and now claims that ‘accountability turned into a nightmare for American schools’ (Ravich, 2010a; see also Ravich, 2010b); but still the disciplinary effects of neo-liberal thinking on education remain powerful.

The origins of the neo-liberal policy framework are usually identified as being the UK government of Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s (Jones, 1989), although somewhat similar policies were pursued in the USA at the time during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Klees, 2008). Direct policy borrowing from the UK was evident in New Zealand in the late 1980s (under Prime Minister Lange and his powerful Minister of Finance, Roger Douglas) (Thrupp, 2001), and soon afterwards in Australia (Pusey, 1991), particularly in the State of Victoria during the government of Jeff Kennett (Angus & Brown, 1997; Angus & Seddon, 2000). The policy direction in Australian education since then, and in the public sector more broadly, has increasingly reflected neo-liberal economic and political thinking, which privileges the private sector over the public sector, and assumes that market arrangements will always produce better outcomes than government regulation. Hence the incorporation into education policy of competition between schools, in both the government and non-government sectors, to attract clients. And because parents need a seemingly objective basis on which to make informed choices about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ schools, a regime of high-stakes tests and other accountability requirements, against which schools must report their results, has been introduced.

There now seems to be complete agreement between the main political parties in Australia, for example, on the promotion of school ‘choice’ and strict accountability and reporting measures for schools. The commitment of the current Australian Federal government to such policies is demonstrated by the introduction of the *My School* website, which makes available to the public comparative information about schools, including their performance on standardised tests. Prime Minister Gillard maintains this will open up ‘a new era of transparency’ Prime Minister Gillard maintains will open up ‘a new era of transparency’ (Gillard, 2009, p. 3) that will enable parents to make informed school choices. At the recent re-launch of the website (it was withdrawn after the initial launch in 2010 because of many data errors), Education Minister Garret stated that: ‘As a government we recognise how important it is that ... we understand how our students are performing, and that, particularly, we enable parents to get the information they need to make the kind of decisions and choices [about schools] they have to make’ (*The Age*, 4 March 2011). *My School* illustrates the extent to which the neo-liberal policy framework emphasises market arrangements, centralised testing regimes, publication of test results, strict school and teacher accountability procedures, centralised curriculum and standards, and a managerial approach to educational governance. Notions of individualism, commodification and market have led to poor student performance being represented as the responsibility of schools rather than the effect of socio-political, cultural and economic factors that affect school performance (Angus, 2009). Policies of ‘choice’ and ‘high-stakes’ testing, the essential component of

the *My School* website, have imposed a very powerful disciplinary template over schools in Australia and elsewhere (Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 119).

Although manifested in somewhat different ways in different contexts, there is clearly a somewhat common trajectory in the neo-liberal politics that is most evident in the English-speaking countries of England, USA, Australia and New Zealand; although strong influences of neo-liberal framing of education policy is also reported in Canada (Yoon & Gulson, 2010), China (Wu, 2011), Japan (Willis & Rapple, 2011), Senegal and other African countries (Nordtveit, 2010), and elsewhere (Lingard, 2010). Moreover, while it is important to recognise that education systems in Europe vary markedly across and even within national borders, there is nonetheless a strongly emerging literature which associates the 'Europeanisation' of education and the 'construction of the European Education Space' (Grek *et al.*, 2009; see also Alexiadiou, 2007; Lawn, 2006) with neo-liberal policy themes of strong accountability, competition, high-stakes testing and a strong connection between education and the economy. Indeed, Jones (2007, p. 326) links such ideas with the proposition that there is a complex 'global architecture of education', and other researchers refer to the influence of neo-liberal and managerial policy themes in the globalisation of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Spring, 2009) and the international influence on education of organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (Henry *et al.*, 2001) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the World Bank (Grek *et al.*, 2009).

Although the relevant literature, therefore, is obviously enormous and very broad, in the remainder of this article I shall draw mainly (but not exclusively) on researchers located in Australia, England and the USA (perhaps the epicentres of neo-liberalism) to support and illustrate my arguments.

Despite the apparent ubiquitousness of neo-liberalism in education in Australia and elsewhere, there are numerous teachers and schools who have resisted the regime of accountability, testing, competition, managerialism and the like. Many examples of alternative educational approaches have been reported, in which practitioners have steadfastly subverted the dominant, neo-liberal framework as they have continued to celebrate access, participation, diversity of cultures, class backgrounds, families, and young people's worlds, experiences and aspirations (Ayers, 2004; Fielding, 2006; Smyth *et al.*, 2008, 2009; Smyth *et al.*, 2010). This article is meant as a celebration of such activists.

Privilege, education and critical research

The hegemony of neo-liberalism, standards and accountability has no doubt contributed to the increasing exclusion of students from backgrounds characterised by poverty and unemployment from the multiple potential benefits of education. This has had a profound effect on the perceived nature and purpose of education, and on the education profession (Ball, 2006; Au, 2009; Gerwitz *et al.*, 2009; Ozga, 2009; Power & Frandji, 2010). Notions of individualism, commodification and market have led to school failure being represented as the

responsibility of schools and individuals, and as being due to the inadequacy of the educational 'product' rather than to the socio-political, cultural and economic factors that affect school performance. The effect of such a narrow view was articulated some time ago by Cummins (2001, p. 653):

... current reform efforts selectively highlight empirical data linking individual student characteristics to underachievement while simultaneously ignoring much stronger empirical relationships between achievement and social and educational inequities. The implicit assumption underlying these (and previous) reform efforts is that instructional interventions can remediate student 'deficits' while ignoring the associated social and educational inequities. There is little evidence of serious inquiry into why 30 years of reform initiatives, each with its claims to scientific legitimacy, should have yielded such paltry results.

Choules (2007a, p. 466) maintains that, in 'the modernist approach to injustice, the normalized gaze is outwards from the privileged position of those who occupy the centre' of social, economic and political life. From the privileged viewpoint of most policy-makers and educators, social problems can conveniently be located with 'the other' and with the presumed deficits found among 'others'. When looked at from our position as insiders, Choules's (2007a, p. 465) argues:

Whoever these Others may be - non-male, non-white, non-able bodied, non-heterosexual, non-affluent - they are positioned as being deviant and lacking. This is strongly present in charity discourses and is also evident in human rights discourses.

The result of this positioning is that those of us who occupy the normalized centre are privileged people in the unchallenged, privileged position of having the power 'to determine who is accorded "help" and when' (Choules, 2007a, p. 465). 'As a result', claims Choules, 'notions of the "deserving" needy and "undeserving" needy arise' (p.466). She points out that that both charity and human rights notions of welfare intervention are based on the condescending notion that some 'others' can be deemed to be deserving, while some are deemed not to be. Discourses of charity and human rights typically leave the asymmetries of power in society untouched and, because they are consistent with the self-evident 'common sense' and naturalised world view of the powerful, reinforce the marginality of those who exist beyond the circle of privilege. And because privileged discourses are the dominant, taken-for-granted discourses, the lack of privilege among marginalised others becomes re-inscribed without the 'others' recognizing it either. This is exactly the kind of situation that Bourdieu (2004) regards as one of 'symbolic violence'.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (2004) maintain that our propensity to take existing social arrangements for granted is a result of our 'being born in a social world, [and so] we accept a whole range of postulates, axioms, which go without saying and require no inculcating' (p. 272). Therefore, although this acceptance of the *status quo* is an act of 'misrecognition' on our part, it 'means that both the dominant and the dominated reproduce structures of domination' (Parkes, 2010, p.348). It is precisely this kind of misrecognition that constitutes 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2004), an illustration of which, in a school context, can be seen in the case of the Brown⁴ family, who live in the working class suburb of Greenfields. Brad Brown was 'kept down' at his school at the end of year 9 and, humiliatingly, was made to repeat the year. He utterly hates it:

I hate school. I hate wakin up for it. I hate goin to it. I hate comin home and havin to work for it . . . just everyfin about it. I just hate everyfin about school.

Brad is thought by teachers to be illiterate and innumerate. But at home he is the trouble-shooter for his mother, Jenny, a social recluse, and his little sister, Lizzie, when the computer breaks down or when someone is needed to interact with local agencies. He works on-line with manuals of technical specifications of automobiles, one of his hobbies. Different teachers refer to Brad as 'a loser', 'a dropkick' and a 'serious discipline problem'. When informed that Brad was something of a wizard on the family computer, his main teacher, Mr Hall, said:

I'm certain that most of the time [Brad's] on the computer, he's searching the Net, and it's for pleasure not for anything educational. You know the sites that . . . As a teacher I have a computer at home for my kids. When my kids use the computer I like to oversee it and see exactly what they're doing. But who knows what Brad is doing?

Mr Hall describes the Greenfields community as:

Well, a lot of strugglers. A lot of families that put education well down their list of priorities. Certainly not all. There are parents who do care and who really do try and help the school, but . . . I mean we get a lot of animosity no matter what we do from the parents towards the school.

He says of Brad's family: 'They're basically working class stock. Apart from that I really don't know'. The school principal adds, 'For a lot of our kids, the only stable person in their lives who has a values system is their teachers'. Within this 'powerful blaming discourse' (Reay, 2001, p.338) the Browns and people like them are constructed as 'others', as being of a different world to the teachers. The above quotes indicate not only a systematic discounting of the Browns' (and working class) cultural experiences, but also a teacher view that implies working class students should endeavour to conform to what McFadden and Munns (2002) call the 'teacher paradigm'. The view is an unreflective, indeed patronising, 'privileged' view from within the circle of privilege (Choules, 2007a).

In a more postmodernist approach to injustice, Choules states, 'the gaze [would be] turned back towards the centre and the suggestion [would be] made that maybe the problem is located there' (2007a, p. 465). The key point about privilege is that 'it is unearned, arbitrary, an accident of birth, the luck of the draw' (p. 472). More importantly, our privilege is typically undeserved and unrecognised by us. We have it but we do not reflect on it. Because we exist within the circle of privilege, we have largely accepted the normative positions of our 'centeredness', so that we 'who have the privilege can be ignorant of [disadvantage], disclaim it, disavow it, and yet be unable to avoid benefiting from it, whether [we] consciously exercise it or not' (p. 472). For, as Applebaum (2003) has shown, privilege exists in a symbiotic relationship with oppression, such that those who are privileged are also, and inevitably, oppressors. Processes of advantaging some of us are also processes of disadvantaging others. This is the case regardless of the fact that there is

. . . resistance [among the privileged] to accepting that there is a structural advantage that goes with being part of the dominant group. The structural advantages are effective because they are so well hidden by dominant discourses. Any advantage is seen to reflect merit and effort rather than systemic inequality (Choules, 2007a, p. 478).

The practical significance, as well as the insidiousness, of the concepts of privilege and ‘othering’ were demonstrated some time ago in Lisa Delpit’s (1995) important book, *Other people’s children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. Indeed, the phrase ‘other people’s children’ has become a kind of shorthand term used to explain barriers to communication between, and a lack of engagement between, teachers (particularly white teachers) and students who have been put at a disadvantage (particularly students of colour). Delpit (1995) identifies what she calls ‘the culture of power’, which is similar to Choules’s (2007a, 2007b) notion of the normalized discourse of privilege, in which taken-for-granted privilege is embodied within cultures of power. This idea is important because it helps us to understand the almost unconscious process of ‘blaming the victim’ (Ryan, 1971) that occurs within society and, particularly, in social institutions like schools. For, when differences are identified between the more advantaged (or privileged) and less advantaged, such as in the continuum of performance of young people in schools, the poor scores of those at the lower end are typically defined as having been caused by particular social problems or particular deficits. Cultures of power and privilege lead to inequalities of power such that ...

In social conditions of unequal power relations between groups, classroom interactions are never neutral with respect to the message [being] communicated to students about the value of their language, culture, intellect, and imagination. The groups that experience the most disproportionate school failure in North America and elsewhere have been on the receiving end of a pattern of devaluation of identity for generations, in both schools and society. Consequently, any serious attempt to reverse underachievement must challenge both the evaluation of identity that these students have historically experienced and the societal power structure that perpetuates this pattern (Cummins, 2001, p. 651).

An illustrative example of lost educational opportunities within such a ‘culture of power’, and a culture of unreflective blaming, is evident in the case of Lisa⁵:

Lisa has just turned sixteen and has found her way into the *Connect* alternative educational program in Wirra Wagga. Lisa effectively left school at about twelve years of age; in fact she attended rarely from the age of about ten, at which point, she says, she had attended six primary schools. Lisa lives with her mother who has been quite sick for a long time. Lisa says, ‘I’ve had to look after mum and two dogs – pit bulls, they are gentle if you train them’. Lisa says that her ‘mum is diabetic, depressed, drug dependant, anorexic and schizophrenic’, and that she, Lisa, has been caring for her since she left school ‘for good’ about four years ago. But she’s glad that she came to *Connect*. Her family had been living on her mother’s disability pension and one of the first things Lisa learnt at *Connect* was that she qualified for the more generous carer’s allowance due being the sole carer for her mother. The increase in welfare benefits has made it easier for Lisa to look after her mum. Lisa says that, before coming to *Connect*, ‘I couldn’t even look people in the eye but it’s really easy now—it’s gotten me more organised, confident’. She claims that she once was ‘the best reader in the school but [her teachers] were saying I wasn’t reading at all’. She has just completed a twenty page short story and has developed a reputation for being a budding poet.

Lisa has learnt to deal with the complex Australian social welfare bureaucracy, cook for and care for her mother and the dogs, manage medical appointments and prescriptions. McGraw, who has also been researching the lives and educational experiences of young people in the Wirra Wagga *Connect* program, explains that many young people, like Lisa, find that instead of schools acknowledging their skills and competence and opening up for them new and empowering ‘possibilities of being

and knowing', they have instead encountered some of the 'worst' aspects of schooling. McGraw (2011, p. 105) writes:

At its worst, [school] narrows opportunities and creates formidable whirlpools of anxiety, fear and distrust. Schools 'sort' and 'shove' young people (Sizer & Sizer, 1999) in ways that are both physical and imagined. They 'track, separate, segregate, apply the kind of "sorting machine" that favours the privileged and treats the others as mere objects, mere "things"' (Greene, 2008). This institutional preference for dividing and selecting, for noting and disregarding leads to poor attendance at school, resistance, disengagement and early school leaving.

Although ostensibly intended to assist all students, and, in many cases, at least rhetorically (Suspectsyna, 2010), particularly the so-called low-performing students, education policies, such as reliance on standardized, high-stakes testing, and even (or perhaps especially) policies of 'inclusion', tend to privilege the culture and experience of mainly white, middle-class students and their families and communities. This amounts to what Wildman and Davis (2000, p. 53) call 'the normalization of privilege' as the attitudes, behaviours and characteristics of the middle class have been allowed to define the norm. Many of the 'othered', 'failing' young people are currently described in policy terms as being 'at risk', a concept that has become a deficit term (te Riele, 2006) but which, as Margonis (1992) points out, was once used by educational reformers to point to educational institutions that, because of their lack of cultural inclusiveness and respect, were putting young people at risk. Margonis (1992, p.344) explains:

What [used to be] an alternative to deficit thought – a way of blaming institutions rather than victims – has become a new and potentially more resilient version of deficit thinking. . . . [C]oncerned with preparing a workforce and preventing the enlargement of welfare rolls, national leaders have aggressively adopted the concept *at risk* as a means of identifying failure before it occurs and shaping students likely to fail into productive and dependable citizens.

In the current, paternalistic usage of 'at risk', however, by identifying students as being at risk of poor performance within the normalized system of schooling, without redressing the nature of schooling itself and querying why it fails to engage such young people, the 'problem' ends up being defined as that of the 'at risk' children themselves, who are assumed to have failed to adapt and cope with the requirements of the supposedly neutral and normal school system. It is therefore assumed that it is the children who are problematic, or deficient, or else it is the nature of their home and community environment that is at fault. As Boykin (2000, p. xii) puts this point:

In this manner, students and their families are conceived to have afflictions that must be cured if positive schooling outcomes are to accrue. In defining the problem of schooling in this way, the prescription most often is to repair the child or fix the family in some way.

Such unreflective assumptions have been pillars of the thirty year history of neo-liberal education policy. Berliner (2007, p.163) argues that 'school reform efforts for poor children almost always will be unsuccessful if they do not consider the outside-of-school conditions that affect the ability to teach and learn successfully inside of school'. Hence, rather than fall into the now-conventional blaming discourse, there is a need to 'invest in student lives outside of school to increase achievement inside schools' (Berliner, 2007, p. 162). This would require teachers to transform their deficit orientation to working-class children and their communities into an assets-based orientation, which would value the alternative knowledge base and curriculum

resources that can be drawn upon from within working class communities and cultures. By incorporating such assets into working-class education (Cummins, 2001; Moll *et al.*, 1992; Smyth *et al.*, 2009), teachers would be engaging in advocacy education with the purpose of learning and teaching collaboratively with their students. Such collaborative power creation, according to Cummins (2001, p. 653), would ‘start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative and intellectual resources poor children bring to school’. This kind of teaching already occurs in many schools, of course, and is very different from that sponsored in neo-liberal, managerial and measurement frameworks in that ‘it offers a much richer notion of teaching’, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2004) explain:

Teaching goes far beyond what teachers do when they stand in front of students, just as student learning is not limited to the classroom. ... It is about how teachers and their students construct the curriculum, commingling their experiences, their cultural and linguistic resources, and their interpretive frameworks. Teaching also entails how teachers’ actions are infused with complex and multilayered understandings of learners, culture, class, gender, literacies, social issues, institutions, ‘herstories’ and histories, communities, materials, texts, and curricula.

Such socially and culturally relevant teaching takes account of the ‘historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992, p. 132). Moll and his colleagues (1992) studied practices of successful teaching and learning that incorporated local ‘funds of knowledge’ in schools and households in working-class Mexican communities in Tucson, Arizona. The purpose of the research was ‘to develop innovations in teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in local households’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992, p.132). Moll and colleagues claim that ‘by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instructions these children commonly encounter in schools’ (p. 132). Instead, the teacher

... will know the child as a ‘whole person’, not merely as a ‘student’, taking into account or having knowledge about the multiple tiers of activity within which the child is enmeshed. In comparison, the typical teacher-student relationship seems ‘thin’ and ‘single-stranded’, as the teacher ‘knows’ the students only from their performance within rather limited classroom contexts. (Moll *et al.*, 1992, pp. 133-134)

By incorporating local funds of knowledge, and developing the radical potential of this concept, teachers can ensure that their classrooms are not sealed off from the ‘social worlds and resources of the community’ (Moll *et al.*, 1992, p.134) that are alive and flourishing beyond the walls of the school, and in which the children are already active and knowledgeable participants, not the ‘passive bystanders’ (p. 134) they are typically assumed to be in conventional classrooms and ‘at risk’ discourses. In attempting to make the school environment less strange and more familiar, ‘learning is motivated by the children’s interests and questions; in contrast to [conventional] classrooms, knowledge is obtained by the children, not imposed by the adults’ (p. 134). Local households are viewed as sources of ‘cultural and cognitive resources with great, *potential* utility for classroom instruction’ (p. 134). This view

... contrasts sharply with prevailing and accepted perceptions of working-class families as somehow disorganized socially and deficient intellectually; perceptions that are well accepted and rarely challenged in the field of education and elsewhere (Moll *et al.*, 1992, p. 134).

An incident that caused me to think long and hard about the concepts of funds of knowledge, alternative knowledge and alternative ways of knowing is described in the following fieldnote that I recorded during research in Wirra Warra:

I am attending a dinner put on by Catholic College for its College Board. I am invited as an 'external expert' with some knowledge about inclusive education. The four or five drink waiters are black in an otherwise all-white crowd. They are Aboriginal teenagers from the remote settlement of Warrum Jungle in the Northern Territory. The oldest, a boy of sixteen, is invited to sit for a moment with the group I am in. The teacher who is the main mentor and carer of the boys, and who supervises the boarding house in which they live, explains that the elders of the Warrum Jungle community have requested that the school, some 2000 kilometres to the south, take responsibility for educating the boys so they can have a better chance of understanding the 'two-way' knowledge and culture that they think can equip the boys for success in contemporary Australian society. Once educated in a white, mainstream school, it is expected that the boys will return to the Northern Territory and bring their education to bear on assisting aboriginal people generally within the Territory and Australian community. The student, Ivan, nods in measured agreement as Ken, the teacher, explains that Ivan's grandfather is the 'knowledge man' of Warrum Jungle. He is responsible for preserving the songlines and sacred stories of his people and is the 'senior man' of the community. Should anything happen to his elderly grandfather, Ivan will become the 'knowledge man'. Meanwhile, Ken says, Ivan is having tremendous difficulty mastering year ten mathematics. Ivan smiles slowly and nods.

This is a particularly stark illustration of a young man with extraordinary knowledge that does not 'count' as relevant or important in the Australian schooling context. Ivan knows and understands incredibly complex, sacred, mystical and ancient knowledge that would be impenetrable to most white, middle-class minds; but his world of highly sophisticated knowledge does not help him confront middle-school mathematics. Other young people quoted so far in this article, such as Lisa and Brad, can also be seen as examples of people with deep knowledge and abilities that are unrecognized and unrewarded in conventional schooling. Small wonder that their school experiences are often less than satisfactory.

McGraw (2011, p. 113) quotes a number of young people who reacted against being 'sorted and shoved' by their former schools but who have recently, tentatively in many cases, joined the alternative *Connect* program which, according to McGraw, 'draw[s] in young people who have been largely forgotten by the system' (p. 106):

I would be on the bus going to school and soon as I reached the school, my legs would start shaking and I would have to go home (Sally, p. 109).

I repeated year 8 and that's where I had most of my troubles because I was treated like a nothing and I just didn't go back to school. I just hated school and I didn't want anything to do with it (Tom, p. 109).

Some teachers I got along with because they spoke to me like I was a normal person, not like I was a three year old, not like they were better, not like I was lesser, just equal and, like, a lot of teachers I couldn't even talk to about anything (Alex, p. 110).

Teachers would pick on me, not pick on me, but annoy me . . . yelling at me for no reason . . . Like one time I asked the teacher for help in Maths and he pretty much told me I was nothing but a dumb shit so I never went to that class again. So I didn't do Maths in year 10 at all. I never went back to that class (Suzie, p. 110).

While Ivan, the Aboriginal boy from Warrum Jungle, is trying extremely hard to cope in a very traditional school environment, and Brad, at Greenfields Secondary College,

desperately wants to leave his working-class school, the young people who have engaged with the *Connect* program in Wirra Wagga seem remarkably positive about their experience of re-engagement in second chance education. For some teachers, too, the *Connect* program has given them a second chance to be the kind of teachers they have always wanted to be. The teachers, interestingly, tend to be retired school principals who can be scathing about schools in general. One says:

We have a toxic culture [in schools generally] because the curriculum is teacher driven as opposed to student driven. There are decisions made to appease and motivate staff rather than serve the best interest of kids. Our kids don't have a true educational experience because the curriculum is still subject/discipline oriented. We don't have a great deal of autonomy. It's a throw back to traditional schooling methods where people feel you need to keep the lead on things. Our timetable isn't flexible enough to cater for middle schooling needs.

I would argue that a large part of the problem identified by this teacher is that teachers, principals and schools are terribly constrained within the current education policy climate. As McGraw (2011, p. 110) points out:

Teachers too are struggling to maintain their own professional and personal identities in a profession that is increasingly moving beyond their control. They struggle to reconcile the complex issues that impact on classroom learning and often find themselves in difficult circumstances mediating strained relationships between school, home, the classroom and school administration ... Teachers, like young people are shoved forcefully to the side and pressured to conform to the political, social and economic agendas of the day. They too are left feeling disoriented, disarmed and disengaged. Amidst such pressure, opportunities for open dialogue are minimised and relationships suffer.

In many countries, particularly English-speaking countries, the extraordinary emphasis on accountability through simplistic reliance on standardized, high-stakes testing in education policy cannot but have had a narrowing effect on educational practice. The policy framework assumes that it is individual teachers and students who are to blame for schools that perform 'poorly'. This framing ignores much that bears down on schools, communities, teachers and students, and accepts a highly idealised managerialist, market-oriented accountability framework. The approach inevitably leads to the standardization of school procedures and forces from the education agenda the many more complex issues that schools need to deal with. Tests have come to define what is 'officially' important. They do so not just in terms of defining educational content, but also, and even more dangerously in many cases, by shaping the processes that are regarded as effective pedagogy—largely rote learning and memorization of test items (Ravich, 2010b). As a result, Cochran-Smith and Lyttle (2006) suggest, 'The explicit narrowing of the purposes of teaching and schooling results in an impoverished view of the curriculum and the broader social and democratic goals, processes, and consequences of education'. The multiple social causes that lead to conditions of disadvantage that exist in and around schools, and which permeate contemporary society, have largely become irrelevant to official educational considerations.

The terrors of performativity and the ideology of accountability

A particular concern of this paper is that, once educational practice is conceived of in a narrow, highly functional and mechanical way, there can be scant regard for the emotional work that is often regarded by educationalists as 'central to teachers'

definitions of being a good teacher [which] is being challenged by the definitions of capability formulated in educational reforms' (Hebson *et al.*, 2007, p. 676). The overwhelming 'standards agenda' displays a 'technical, calculative, rational mode of policy making' (Mahony *et al.*, 2004, p. 435). The emphasis on accountability through the use of student test scores, Webb (2005, p. 194) suggests:

... provide[s] the only kind of visibility that enables policy-makers to hold educators accountable. This form of visibility - data surveillance - compels educators to comply with state and federal standards through threats of sanctions and promises of rewards.

The 'high stakes' associated with such accountability and measurement bring teachers to 'the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). Within such disciplinary frameworks there is public exposure of school 'performance' through crude forms of accountability such as the public reporting of test scores, and therefore there is 'an escalation of accountability politics as educators confront an erosion of professional power from state governments and the corporate community' (Webb, 2005, p. 191). Such framing has had a conservative and restrictive effect on teacher professionalism as a whole. Education workers are likely to have become more timid and more compliant as outdated notions of teaching as transmission have been rediscovered and reinforced.

A number of critical education scholars point to a significant decline in the professional autonomy of teachers and principals over the past two decades. A powerful paper on this phenomenon in the UK has the title, *The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity* (Ball, 2003). Clearly, the Foucaultian concept of 'performativity' is associated with strategies of surveillance that consolidate a culture of managerialism and compliance within the education profession. Some authors write in a similar vein about teachers and principals being caught up in the 'politics of blame' (e.g. Thrupp, 1999: see also, Fitzgerald, 2008). As for the USA, an entire issue of the journal *Education Policy* (volume 22, number 1, 2008) was devoted to the politics of 'fear' in US education and, in particular, to the way in which 'high-stakes' testing has, according to the various authors, imposed a very powerful disciplinary template over education (Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 119). Current policy frameworks would seem to directly restrict the professionalism of educators, and to result in pedagogies and curriculum that are extraordinarily narrow, and which promote a conservative and backward-looking conception of the appropriate relationships between schools and their communities. Forms of teacher professionalism that, in both conceptual and practical terms, are far more relational and participative than those envisaged within the standardized, neo-liberal, managerialist, agenda, are required.

Within the current, top-down, managerial educational discourse, accountability has taken on the status of 'a political ideology' (Nikel & Lowe, 2010, p. 590) because it has become a shorthand, or 'relay device', for a suite of policies that build into a relatively solid neo-liberal framework of management, surveillance and control. The ideology of accountability, therefore, is likely to grow increasingly powerful and, as Elliott (2010, p. 215) points out:

Dominant ideologies appear in ways that can be taken for granted and therefore rendered invisible. The invisibility of 'taken-for-granted' norms of behavior and expectations gives ideology its power and significance.

The current suite of managerial education policies, according to Nikel and Lowe (2010), are generally derived from a management-oriented ideology that 'tends to focus at the institutional and systemic levels with a concern for effectiveness and efficiency' (p. 590). These values, while important, have seemingly been imposed with little demur within a supposedly value-neutral, technicist education policy discourse. The managerial orientation ensures that targets 'must be measurable if we are to be able to determine the degree of effectiveness' (p. 590). However, as Nikel and Lowe emphasize, 'only some of the many desirable outcomes that we might specify for education will lend themselves to such easy quantification', so the danger is that 'we are drawn into the fallacy of replacing what is important with what is measurable' (2010, p. 596). These authors point out that alternative educational values, such as relevance, responsiveness and individual learning, would be more dominant within a policy discourse that was education-led or 'pedagogy-led' (p. 590). But instead, concepts of accountability, competition, and ranking dominate education discourse. The overall effect, says Fitzgerald (2008), is that not only do conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' teacher get distorted in this process, but so do long-established professional beliefs and understandings about the purposes of schooling:

Schooling has therefore mutated from a way of preparing young people for broader purposes (such as participation in democratic society) to a mechanism of selection and preparation for the local and global labour market. In other words, the *unquestioned* purpose and responsibility of schools is to provide the work force necessary to compete in the global economy (Fitzgerald, 2008, p. 124, emphasis in original).

The internal focus on the delivery of instruction and test-taking inside schools ignores the point that the major influences on the school performance of children exist outside rather than inside the school. This point was challenged over a long period by 'school effectiveness' researchers, such as Reynolds and Teddlie (2003), who endeavoured to identify 'school level' factors associated with positive student learning outcomes. However, after decades of school effectiveness research, the size of the 'school effect' identified, it transpires, is about the same as that identified in the 1960s by Coleman and his team of researchers (Coleman *et al.*, 1966), who, all those years ago, put it as contributing about 15% of the effect on a pupil's school achievement compared with about 85% of the effect being due to family and environmental circumstances (Teddlie, Reynolds & Sammons, 2000). I think the lesson that can be learnt from the failure of school effectiveness research⁶ and, by extrapolation, all internally-directed recipes for school success such as massive testing regimes, is not that schools are unable to make a difference to students' learning, but that, in order to do so, schools must take into account the family and social circumstances of the young people to whom they are obliged to provide an education. Indeed, as I have been arguing, we need to think about how education, as a social institution, systematically acts to disadvantage certain types of people in certain types of communities and how such processes of disadvantaging can be turned around.

The point is that education, if it is to be socially responsible and equitable, must be sufficiently inclusive of the lives and cultures of 'others', those outside the circle of privilege, including the most disadvantaged students and their communities, in order

to make a positive difference in their lives. The shocking reality is that, in too many cases, the level of cultural dissonance in many schools is such that many students feel so alienated that they are unlikely to make the active choice of staying on and trying to succeed in school. For too many working-class and marginalized students the school seems somewhat like a foreign country in which they, their families and the people they know seem like outsiders who are not valued and respected (Smyth *et al.*, 2010). It is imperative, therefore, for educational reformers to convince policymakers and fellow educators that schools need to do whatever they can to understand and reach out to all young people, particularly disadvantaged young people and their communities, and move to meet them rather than expect them to adjust to the entrenched school and teacher paradigms that tend to reflect the norms of unacknowledged privilege. Schools may then have some success in attempting to engage such students in relevant and interesting school experiences in which they can recognize themselves, their families and their neighbourhoods.

Activist teachers making a difference

I do not mean to suggest that there are not schools in which principals and teachers *are* endeavouring to work along the lines described above. The teachers in the *Connect* program quoted above, for instance, are obviously dissatisfied with the state of schooling and are reaching out to engage with disaffected and marginalized young people and to bring them in to the educational fold in ways that are tolerant, educative and respectful of their diverse experiences and funds of knowledge. For instance, a number of parent volunteers have been encouraged to participate in a range of ways at Wirra Warra Primary School. One mother says that many of the children there carry enormous ‘emotional baggage and pent-up anger’. According to this parent, the children particularly need understanding rather than punitive behavioural management measures. She advocates ‘sitting with a child, listening to them, encouraging them, giving them praise that they don’t necessarily get from home’. This is important, she says, ‘because many kids come from fractured and unstable homes [so] they need a stable and secure school environment’. On the basis of being a parent and a close observer of primary teachers in Wirra Wagga, she says:

Teachers have to earn the trust and respect of kids. This won’t happen by asserting their authority. They have to model respectful behaviour, work in non-confrontational ways and gain their trust.

A teacher at this school, who is trying to learn from this mother’s insights, is doing everything she can to take seriously the funds of knowledge and cultural understandings that the young people in her class bring to school. She says:

The learning is everything for these kids. That’s what it is all about. They need to have choices when they leave this school . . . We are actually trying to run sessions where the kids talk about their learning; we have to make sure that everyone has a way of showing their parents what they are learning. I think this is a way of giving kids ownership of their own learning and it’s hard for teachers to let go of this ownership . . . It’s worth me spending some time down at the community renewal talking to parents about their kids down there. In the street smarts they are very advanced; we don’t acknowledge all the other things that these kids know . . . My impression is that we haven’t asked the kids here enough about what they think . . . It’s all part of a bigger picture of change.

A teacher at Bountiful Bay, another locality that is stigmatized by poverty, poor housing and unemployment, is pleased that he made the decision to live in the area, a move which has enabled him to see his students and families as less 'othered' and more nuanced and complicated:

When you live in the community you get to know the kids and their parents outside of school. They see you doing the things you are passionate about. I've made lots of contacts with industry and commerce. I love where I live ... I have become more politically motivated in trying to push the school agenda.

This teacher has negotiated with colleagues to introduce an oral history project:

We plan on interviewing people who are ex-students and want to develop a PowerPoint presentation and attach it to the school's web site ... The regional library is really keen to get hold of what we produce. The students know that their teachers are excited about this. They became really excited when they found some maps. We gave them the option of going back to normal classes but they decided to stay.

Other class groups are working on team projects in 'community studies'. A teacher explains:

The students tend to choose something quite local, such as bullying, the skate park, foreshore development, water restrictions, road rage, and redevelopment of the local shopping centre and so on. We are involving the kids a lot more in the community and their place in the community. There is real animation in kids' discussion now when they report on what they found out from their investigations. Students get to see some of the complexities of the political issues involved in development issues. Regular curriculum was suspended for the duration of the project and a flexible timetable was introduced to facilitate sessions.

These examples illustrate the point that respectful and meaningful educative processes require engagement between teachers and students, schools and communities, and in multi-directions among educators, education officials, parents, young people and community members. In other words, education is, first and foremost, a relational (and certainly not a managerial) enterprise. Through engaging with students more or less on their own terms and not as 'others', some of the teachers quoted above have been able, to varying degrees, to achieve the kind of somewhat authoritative, but certainly not authoritarian, relationships with students that enable teachers, through respectful negotiation and persuasion and willingness to engage, to become accepted as legitimate supportive classroom authorities rather than as condescending managers of imposed 'learning'. Only through such engagement, I would argue, can local schools and local communities in areas of social and economic disadvantage find the necessary relevance and responsiveness, and potentially, reflexivity, which Nikel and Lowe (2010) point out is necessary for a quality education. But I would also claim that all students, not just those who have been 'othered' and put at a disadvantage, deserve to be treated in a more dignified, engaged and respectful manner than seems to be the case within the ideology of accountability and top-down managerialism.

Conclusion: Reforming schools, reforming society

This paper has illustrated that it is not necessarily the case that schools no longer try to accommodate the full diversity of students. However, it undoubtedly is true that neo-liberal frameworks, market arrangements in education, and the heavy compliance regimes under which schools typically operate, have pushed and shoved schools

towards an impersonal homogeneity that is characterized by remote ‘standards’ and an ideology of accountability. In this situation, as Hargreaves (2005, p. 215), writing about the situation in England, points out, the term ‘performance’ is used far more frequently than ‘learning’, and even when the term ‘learning’ is used, it is almost always in the sense of attaining *a priori* defined ‘facts’ and objectives, not in the sense of ‘learning’ as the construction or co-construction of knowledge. The learner is rarely regarded as having any sense of agency in the process of ‘learning’, or, in the terminology that more accurately applies in the current policy discourse in countries like Australia, the UK and USA, in their ‘instruction’. Learners are not expected to bring their own knowledge to the process of knowledge co-construction, nor are they expected to seriously engage with knowledge and learning.

According to Thomson and her colleagues (2010), the emphasis on performance and measurement, rather than learning, results in a ‘policy imaginary’ that is characterised by an

... *equation* of organizations, teachers and pupils into categories and numbers, where schooling is seen as *infinitely calculable and available for calibration* and permanently available for *forensic* dissection through apparently objective, scientific and transparent computational practices (p.652, emphasis in original).

In this way, students are subject to a ‘pedagogy of under-attainment’ (Thomson *et al.*, 2010, p.651) as they are translated into ‘good data’. However, the authors remind us that

... good data [is] not the same as good education if that is taken to mean students being productively engaged in learning which is worthwhile and gives access to powerful concepts which have explanatory power in the world (p.653).

The cold and distal form of engagement that characterizes the currently prevailing measuring and reporting approach to education, with its limited aspiration of improving test scores but not necessarily the learning of much that is important, does not allow teachers to see their students outside of the passive identity that is constructed within deficit discourses. To the extent that this is the case, teachers are unlikely to ‘turn around’ (Comer & Kamler, 2004, p.300) their own assumptions about, and their ways of viewing, their students. Indeed, the patronizing attitude within this perspective is most likely to reinforce the teachers’ acceptance of the perceived deficits (Gale & Densmore, 2002) and existing patterns of alienation and disaffection among young people (McInerney, 2010, p.28). For the kind of ‘turn around’ thinking described by Comer and Kamler (2004) to occur, educators need to question ‘habitual, deficit ways of speaking [and thinking] about culturally diverse, poor, working-class families’ (Comer & Kamler, 2004, p. 296) so that they can recognise and work with the lived experiences, potential, competence, resourcefulness and existing funds knowledge of the young people they are supposed to teach. Such turning around requires critical reflection on the part of teachers, and, as McInerney (2010, p. 33) points out:

If teachers do not aspire to (or have little time for) critical reflection in their own professional lives, it is difficult to envisage how they can Foster the acquisition of critical literacies amongst their students.

Authentic, socially democratic pedagogies require teachers to see students as active constructors of knowledge not just passive recipients. Such turn around thinking, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It is informed by broader and deeper understanding of the knowledge, resources and values that are abundant in students, families and local communities, and comes about through critical reflection on the lived lives of knowing, competent young people like Brad, Lisa and Ivan.

In terms of structural enabling, the ‘policy as numbers’ approach (Ozga, 2009) to education, as I have tried to illustrate, facilitates an educational convergence around an international obsession with test results, limited goals of schooling that rely on teacher and student performativity, and a paradigm of measurement in which dehumanized numbers/scores are the focus of attention rather than the minds and spirits of the young people being ‘educated’. Indeed, any notion of rich or authentic or high-level learning is sidelined when the fetish for accountability leads to the measurement of ‘what is easy to measure rather than what is significant’ (Lingard, 2010, p. 135). This highly reductionist approach tends to lead to narrow, standardized tests, low-level intellectual skills of drill, repetition and rote learning, and a marginalization of ‘educational’ concerns about the multiple purposes of schooling in terms of social justice, economic opportunity and democratic outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The reverse side of the ‘policy as numbers’ structural coin is that, while enabling such educational narrowing, it inhibits more humane, richer, socially relevant, authentic, and socially responsible forms of education.

I have not developed in this paper the theme of the economization of education (Ball, 2008; Menter, 2009) over the past three decades in the production of human capital and supposed economic competitiveness within a policy frame that positions teachers as ‘servants of the global economy’ (Menter, 2009, p. 225; Angus, 2004). My purpose here has been much more modest, but nonetheless important I think. It has been to take up the theme that educators should learn from the emerging international evidence of failure of the neo-liberal education policy ensemble (Alexander, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Lingard, 2010) and look to other evidence of teachers and schools making a positive difference to the lives of young people. By ‘positive’ difference, I do not mean merely attempting to induct young people who have been put at a disadvantage into the valorised cultural capital that comes more-or-less naturally to those of us who are already within the circle of privilege (Choules, 2007a, 2007b). Although understanding social and cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging is extremely important for teachers and students, I am not advocating the kind of *compensatory* education that is still characterised by notions of charity and condescension. The position I am putting is that educators need to counter such typical valorisation of privileged dispositions and capitals and, instead, aspire to a ‘new social democratic imaginary’ (Lingard, 2010) which builds on a sense of hope and justice for all students, and upon a recognition that teaching is inevitably a political act in which educators have to decide whose side they are on (Connell *et al.*, 1982).

We have long known that ‘schools tend to reflect the power structure of society and that these power relations are directly relevant to education outcomes’ (Cummins 2001, p.650). But education is also a major social institution that contributes to the production of, as well as the reproduction of, and as well as resistance to, the power relations of society (Willis, 1981). Reforms of teaching and reform of schools

therefore contribute to reform of society. However, as Raymond Williams (1961) continued to remind us, the long march through the institutions of society is very long indeed, and very slow and inconsistent. Jean Anyon (2005) also continues to remind us of the ‘radical possibilities’ of education and reinforces the point that significant change in education can only be sustained by significant change within the larger social order in which schools are embedded. But educators cannot wait for widespread social, economic and political reform that will result in a more democratic society in which social justice and equality will prevail. We must keep chipping away at the greater goal of achieving democratic schooling for social justice.

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³ All names, including the name *Connect*, names of people and placenames used in relation to data included in this paper are pseudonyms.

⁴ The 'Browns' are one of four families reported in Author *et al.* (2004)

⁵ The following transcript extracts, except for those attributed to McGraw (2011), are taken from the original data gathered for the research reported in Smyth *et al.* (2008, 2009), and in Angus *et al.* (2004).

⁶ It is not possible to rehearse the full arguments against School Effectiveness here. Critiques include Angus (1993, 2009) and Thrupp (1999).