Social justice, equity, schools and the curriculum

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Much important educational research has been conducted under the banner of advancing social justice over recent decades, particularly building on work in the sociology of knowledge, which problematises curricula, the social contexts in which they were constructed, and the power relations reflected by their content and hierarchical organisation (Apple, 1979, 1982, 2000; Teese, 2003). The now long-standing critique of deficit discourse in educational systems, with implications for their organisation of students, teachers' pedagogical practice, and curriculum choices, and the depth of its reach into state and national educational policy, is testimony to this theoretical and practical work (Flores, Cousin & Diaz, 1991; Auerbach, 1989). In this paper I do not want to dismiss the complexity of this work nor its importance in contributing to improved outcomes for disadvantaged students within existing systems. However, in the context of ongoing international concern about improving quality with equity in education, it is timely to raise three foundational limitations of the social justice agenda:

First, the equating of social justice with improved equity for more authentically meritocratic outcomes; secondly, the lack of space for more fundamental challenges to existing constructions of high-status knowledge; and third, the lack of attention to wider social and economic change, as part of the struggle to construct a more equal, just and democratic world-system in which socially just educational systems that contribute to the transformation of society, can be built.

In setting out this paper, I am aware that I leave myself open to claims of being backward looking, anachronistic, perhaps even nostalgic for the relative certainties of a Marxist critique of schooling and society. I believe that the scope and emphasis of much contemporary scholarship around social justice adds weight to the call to reconsider these foundational questions (Hill, 2006; Rikowski, 2004).

This comes on top of the weight of substantial evidence of ongoing and exacerbated levels of social and economic inequality globally, and growing calls and international movements for an alternative world-system (George, 2004; Monbiot, 2003; Notes from Nowhere, 2003). Further, I draw on world-systems arguments of a crisis in the capitalist world-economy as an historical system, and the associated need for organised interventions in its long period of transition toward an uncertain future, to support the renewed emphasis on schooling and curriculum for social transformation. Finally, I refer to the hope found in contemporary Venezuela, a liberal democratic state engaged in a process of defining a viable model of democratic, participatory socialism for the 21st century, and constructing a system of public education that directly contributes to this process.

The context

Australian and international research has consistently identified social and economic characteristics of 'disadvantaged' student populations, explored the ways in which these characteristics interact with students' experience of schooling and the curriculum, and advocated interventions to achieve more equitable outcomes (Connell, 2002; Thrupp, 2002; Delpit, 1988). Initiatives like the Disadvantaged Schools Program, and its subsequent transformation into literacy programs under the federal Howard Government (Thomson, 2001), had their roots in the Karmel (1973) report and associated research acknowledging that expanded, equal access to public schooling did not translate into equitable outcomes. Inspired by Bowles and Gintis' (1976) groundbreaking work, the idea that school systems, schools and their curricula bore responsibility for the inequitable results of identified groups of students was increasingly a focus of Australian research into the 1980s (see for example the now classic study by Connell, Ashenden, Kessler & Dowsett (1982), or Harris (1982) for a Marxist account).
Despite periods of critique and partial reform initiatives targeting inequitable student outcomes of low socio-economic status students, there have been mixed results, with socio-economic status (SES) persisting as a reliable measure of likely success in schooling (Erebus International, 2005). The contemporary proliferation of international testing regimes, comparing the learning outcomes of participating countries' student populations, is foregrounding equity as an intrinsic component of quality education for all. Results from the latest round of the large international comparative studies, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), show ongoing or increased rates of inequity within Australian systems (Thomson & De Bortoli, 2008; OECD, 2007; Mullis, Martin & Fog, 2005; Thomson & Fleming, 2004), particularly for Indigenous and low-SES students.

In addition to these comparative measures of reading, mathematical and scientific literacy, work in the Australian Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth confirms the persistence of links between SES and student participation in Year 12 (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003), subject choices (Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Fullarton et al., 2003; Lamb & Ball, 1999), and between school differences in student performance (Rothman & McMillan, 2003). These findings align with international research documenting substantive differences in the quality of pedagogy received by students in identified poor or low-SES schools (Fransoo, Brownell, Roos, Ward & Wilson, 2005; Lee & Wong, 2004; Haberman, 2002). On the question of curriculum and students' subject choices, Teese and Polesel (2003) cite differential degrees of anchorage to the high-stakes academic curriculum influenced by varying levels of cultural and economic resources that students bring to the school (pp. 185–198). This analysis connects with Bourdieuan perspectives addressed below, whereby a lack of fit between the social and cultural capital of some groups of students and high-status subjects contributes to inequitable access to and outcomes in those subjects. Further, Teese (2006) offers a critique of the systemic function of 'disadvantaged schools' as supporting the inequitable achievement of high-SES students in high-status curriculum subjects in non-disadvantaged schools. In the context of this extensive research on inequities within schooling, pedagogical and curricular reforms aimed at reducing equity gaps emerge as the mainstay of the social justice agenda.

**Social justice as equity/meritocracy**

In the face of this historical and seemingly intractable association between socio-economic status and school educational outcomes, conceptualisations of social justice in education have shifted over time. Bowles and Gintis (1976) emphasised the limitations of any reform efforts without a corresponding transformation of capitalist society, a point which while not entirely lost (see for example Starr, 1991) has understandably made way for work focused on what can be done within existing institutions to make a difference. On this point, much attention in Australia and elsewhere is given to Finland's performance in TIMMS and PISA, as a relatively high quality and high equity system. While the strong, social-democratic welfare state model of Finland may be acknowledged, including its high levels of public expenditure on schooling and school teachers, such attention on TIMSS and PISA results reinforces the goal of lifting overall performance, with improved equity, within existing systems.

The focus on quality with equity supports a conceptualisation of social justice as the movement towards a more authentically meritocratic system, in which students' outcomes are determined solely by their interest, ability and effort. Australia's National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century are an exemplar, with Goal 3 defining socially just schooling in these terms (MCEETYA, 1999). While the up-take of these goals by state and territory systems is variable, policy statements and reform initiatives across systems reflect the conceptualisation of social justice as lifting student performance generally, and reducing the influence of social background on student achievement within existing schools and curriculum frameworks (see for example the Quality Teaching initiative in New South Wales (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003), building on the Productive Pedagogies reforms from the Queensland School Longitudinal Reform Study (Education Queensland, 2001)). Within initiatives like these, attention has particularly focused on teachers' pedagogy and curriculum content that can lift disadvantaged students' engagement with the school and its curriculum through improved connections with...
their diverse experiences and backgrounds. The intent here is to lift access to and engagement with academically rigorous, high-status knowledge for all, rather than inadvertently reinforce/reproduce disadvantage through a more ‘relevant’ curriculum content designed for low-SES students.

There is a lot to be said for such goals, particularly if incremental pedagogical and curricular reforms can reduce equity gaps while simultaneously lifting all students’ intellectual achievement. The ongoing struggle of systems to fully realise their diverse experiences and backgrounds. The existing social structures. all, rather than inadvertently reinforce/reproduce and school knowledge might contribute to the disadvantage through a more ‘relevant’ curriculum

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A fuller conceptualisation of social justice ought to move beyond the achievement of meritocratic goals, which can seemingly never be realised within existing social structures. It should challenge constructions of high-status knowledge, including the dominance of science and a nomothetic epistemology (Wallerstein, 2004, 2006), and challenge the social and economic arrangements in which this knowledge is reproduced, so that schooling and school knowledge might contribute to the transformation of society.

Equitable access to or reconstructing high-status knowledge

Underlying the goals of improved equity and meritocracy is a major and well established critique of deficit discourses that identify differential outcomes for groups like low-SES students and then pathologise and essentialise these as social deficits, adding to and reinforcing educational disadvantage and inequitable outcomes across a range of measures (e.g. Comber & Kamler, 2004). This work is hugely important, particularly that which demonstrates the subsequent changes to teachers’ expectations of different groups of students, and their associated teaching practices, which exacerbate rather than improve equity (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006).

A substantial body of research, applying a Bourdieuan analyses of the differential cultural capital brought by students to schools, argues that prescribed curricula, and teachers in their pedagogical practice, should acknowledge and include more diverse capitals and knowledge. The more inclusive approach becomes a vehicle for providing disadvantaged students with access to the privileged knowledge and cultural capital required for social and economic success in and beyond schooling (Mills, 2007; Delpit, 2003). Teese (2006) adds a call for improved equity beyond retention rates in disadvantaged schools to expanded access to “areas of the curriculum of high cognitive demand” in order to turn around ‘disadvantaged schools’ and students’ movement “out of the older academic streams and into newer general and vocational studies” (p. 155). Further, he articulates the daily reality confronted by teachers in disadvantaged schools where “nothing can be taken for granted regarding a child’s readiness for school, his or her language skills, attitude to work in a classroom, respect for others, comprehension of the ‘craft’ of being a pupil” (p. 158).

Similarly, Mills (2007) provides a comprehensive critique of essentialised deficit discourses, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) Forms of Capital to elaborate the case for how this occurs. She argues that teachers need to simultaneously acknowledge and include the knowledge of diverse student populations into the school curriculum, as well as “teach the academic skills and competencies required to enable their students to succeed in mainstream societies, while also ensuring that they value students’ existing cultural repertoires” (p. 19). The analysis offers rich insight into the ways by which some students are alienated from high-status classroom knowledge and practice, and for problematising responses which seek to provide an alternative ‘more relevant’ curriculum content to identified ‘equity groups’ ahead of facilitating their access to the high-status knowledge, skills and dispositions.
For Mills (2007), citing Comber and Hill (2000), a “socially just curriculum equips students with ‘the best of what contemporary society has to offer’... Complex collections of practices that make up the cultural capital valued by dominant groups” (p. 19). The outcome sought here is one of building on the cultural capital that disadvantaged students bring to the school by adding “other cultural capital to their repertoires” (Mills, 2007, p. 19). A lack of access to the highly prized cultural capital at home leads to calls for “time in the company” of students and adults “who possess the cultural capital that is regarded by society” (p. 15). While firm in its critique of essentialised deficit discourses, there is an evident tension here in the way that such an approach aims to empower disadvantaged students by adding high-status knowledge and dispositions to their cultural repertoires, while rejecting the positioning of these students and their social demographic as being deficient.

The additive feature of such an approach is qualified by the explicit call to value and build on the diverse knowledges and backgrounds that students bring to the school. In a similar argument to that used by Delpit (2003) in relation to dominant and non-dominant language dialects, students are to maintain their non-dominant knowledge and dispositions and learn those required for access to power in society. The recognition of the knowledge that diverse student populations bring to school is clearly serious, and an initial move towards more fundamental reconstructions of established hierarchies of knowledge. However, such an approach remains, at least partially, a compensatory one, seeking a wider and more equitable distribution of unreconstructed high-status academic curriculum knowledge. This in turn aims for a more equitable spread of access to the associated unequal social and economic benefits associated with educational success.

The cultural capital approach outlined here favours practices that acknowledge and value diversity as a mechanism for distributing access to the high-status forms of knowledge. The deeper issue of seriously questioning and subverting the prevailing structures of knowledge in society, and its educational systems, is secondary at best to advancing more meritocratic, but limited, outcomes within existing curriculum hierarchies. This alternative is not without its own problems, for example, running the risk of falling into relativism through the sociological critique of dominant forms of knowledge and the external power structures that they reflect. As Moore and Young (2001) argue, such an approach “achieves its radical objective of not having to refer to any established traditions of academic debate; all academic theories, by definition, exclude ‘silent’ others”, but in the process this approach also “precludes the possibility of an alternative theory of knowledge” (p. 451). They go on to posit a “social realist approach to knowledge” as a way of responding to this dilemma, which seeks to “interrogate the knowledge structures and contents of the curriculum in a way that acknowledges their social basis and their capacity (or lack thereof) to transcend it” (p. 454). In line with this critique, I now argue for an alternative approach to knowledge that disrupts established hierarchies in ways that may produce more equity, and in a Freirean sense seek to directly contribute to students' preparedness and capacity to transform society in which education systems and their functions exist.

**Schooling and curriculum for a (utopistic) socially just world-system**

Up to this point I have acknowledged that the social justice agenda for schooling and the curriculum in Australia is a complex one, and that progress made is evident in both the generalised rejection of deficit discourses that essentialise low academic achievement in disadvantaged groups, and in broader policy efforts to reduce equity gaps and achieve more equitable, meritocratic outcomes. Whether the focus is on teachers’ pedagogy, assessment or curriculum, qualifications continue to be raised about the extent to which reforms even meet their stated objectives (see for example Woods’ (2007) critique of national benchmarks), and about what is achievable within existing social and economic conditions (Bardsley, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). Some Australian research does call for pedagogy that is explicitly linked to student interests and concerns, and to broader social justice campaigns and initiatives, as a strategy for improving disadvantaged students' engagement and for contributing through schooling to wider social changes that underlie students' disengagement from schooling (Di Bartolo, 2005; McInerney, 2006). The tensions within and between responses that emphasise social structures and individual agency in explaining educational outcomes are succinctly reviewed by Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006), who note that through the development of more productive pedagogies, teachers and schools can...
make a positive difference on differential outcomes, but that this is constrained by the unequal structure of society in which schools operate (pp. 170–211).

In this context, I want to argue for more than an acknowledgement of the limits on what is possible within contemporary society, and re-invoke an agenda that both recognises the need for wider democratic socialist change, as well as the potential for schooling and school curricula to contribute to such change. This is not a naïve utopian claim, but to use Wallerstein’s (1998) term, an example of utopistics, “the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgement as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems... the face of an alternative, credibly better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future” (pp. 1–2). I make this argument conscious of the extensive critiques of former ‘real existing socialist’ countries, and in particular the tendency of so-called systems of socialist education to hold more in common than in contrast with systems, pedagogies and practices in capitalist societies (see for example Griffiths, 2004). Cases like Venezuela, since the election of President Chávez in 1998, help to make the move from a disempowering thesis of all reform being useless within capitalism, to a more positive consideration of how curriculum reform might in fact contribute to the required dismantling of “existing power structures” to which Starr (1991, p. 20) referred.

The Venezuelan example
Prime Minister Rudd is clearly no President Chávez, but the contemporary Venezuelan experience provides an interesting example of a liberal democratic state electing and re-electing a national government under the banner of constructing a viable model of ‘socialism for the 21st century’ (Wilpert, 2007; Gott, 2005). As in former socialist countries, a part of the Chávez Government’s socialist project is the reconstruction of mass education, with a major emphasis on universalising access to free, state provided, quality education from child care through to university. In Venezuela this involves the expansion of a reconstructed, formal public system, and creation of a parallel system of adult education, both having an explicit political edge, evident in the positioning of public education as one of five key motors in the project of constructing 21st century socialism (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007).

A national curriculum document has recently been released for discussion in Venezuela, outlining a framework for all levels of schooling that is “oriented toward the consolidation of a humanistic, democratic, protagonistic, participatory, multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural, pluri-lingual and intercultural society...” (Ministerio del Poder Popular Para la Educación, 2007, p. 11). The framework would not be out of place in Australia, or indeed in many countries, setting out four fundamental axes of the reconstructed Bolivarian Education System, aimed at the “integral development of the new social, humanistic and environmentalist social person”.

The four axes are: Learning to create; Learning to co-exist and participate; Learning values; and Learning to reflect (p. 16). These principles are consistently referred back to the socialist political project to ‘promote the formation of new republicans, with creative and transformatory autonomy and with revolutionary ideas; with an attitude of critical inquiry in order to put into practice new and original solutions for the endogenous transformation of the social-community context’ (p. 16).

There is much important research to be done about the Venezuelan case. The progress of its educational reform, and the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ of which this is a part, holds much of value for all with an interest in socialist alternatives to our current world-system. The Venezuelan process to date has been complex and contradictory, and the substantive achievements in education beyond expanding access notoriously difficult to assess in these early days. Responding to the national curriculum debate in Australia recently, Reid (2006) emphasised the potential for this space to be “a democratic matter ... the regularly updated minutes of an ongoing public conversation about what it means to be an Australian in the 21st century” (p. 69). He added that a national curriculum could be “the common element connecting the multiple contexts and environments in which education functions and for which young people are being prepared” (p. 70). Cases like Venezuela offer hope for renewed curriculum work that is firmly focused on the transformation of society as a permanent feature of a social justice agenda for schooling. This ongoing public conversation offers an opportunity to return to the foundational critique of capitalist society and its transformation for a more profound conceptualisation and realisation of social justice in schooling.
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References
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