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Toward a critical pedagogy of engagement for alienated youth: insights from Freire and school-based research

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Although alienation is widely recognized as a barrier to educational success for many students, prevailing explanations tend to focus on psychological traits and individual deficits, rather than the oppressive economic and social structures bearing down on young people. This paper addresses the issues of youth alienation and student engagement from a critical/sociological perspective. Informed by Paulo Freire's philosophy and praxis, I argue that any meaningful response to the phenomenon requires a critique of the dehumanizing forces that operate within and outside schools and the development of a renewed project for a critical pedagogy that is more attuned to the influences of globalization and popular culture on young people's lives. The practical possibilities, limitations and potential development of such a pedagogy is discussed with reference to a cluster of Australian high schools serving low socioeconomic communities.

Keywords: alienation; critical pedagogy; Freire; student engagement

Introduction

A rationale for curriculum reform is often predicated on the need to tackle the problems of alienation and disengagement that are said to accompany young people's experience of schooling in the adolescent years (Cormack, 1996; White, 1996). Just what constitutes alienation in the school context is problematic, but it undoubtedly involves varying degrees of student estrangement from the learning process, as manifested in behaviors such as passive resistance, withdrawal of labor, truancy, disruptive activities, violence, self-harm and dropping out of school (Johnson, 2005). Judging by school retention and participation rates from Australia and overseas, youth alienation is a widespread and growing phenomenon. Somewhere between 30 and 40% of young people in western countries do not complete their secondary education. Extensive studies in the United States point to a steep decline in motivation amongst high school students with some 40% claiming that they have little or no interest in schooling (Martin, 2008). The Office for Standards in Education estimated that there were at least 10 000 15-year-olds missing from school rolls in England in 2002 (Ofsted, 2003, p.44). Retention rates in Australia have declined appreciably over the past decade with 2002 data showing secondary school completion rates as low as 66% in some states and territories (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2004). These figures are cause for alarm but they only tell part of the story; educational disadvantage and associated problems of school attrition and low participation are most pronounced in

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indigenous communities, remote locations and low socioeconomic districts (Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

It may be an oversimplification to suggest that all of these problems can be attributed to student alienation, but a compelling case can be made for investigating the features of schools that contribute to disaffection amongst young people and to report on policies and practices that enhance student engagement. Drawing on ethnographic data from Australia, this paper examines youth alienation with particular reference to Freire's educational philosophy and praxis. I believe notions of subjectivity, oppression and liberation are especially relevant to this topic since the phenomenon of student alienation can be understood, at least in part, in terms of the dehumanizing forces operating within schools and society at large. At the core of this argument is the question of human agency. When students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance or withdraw their assent altogether from schooling. Although critical pedagogy alone cannot transform the oppressive social conditions that envelop the lives of many young people, it has the potential to develop in students a critical consciousness of the systemic nature of the sources of their alienation and to open their minds to the liberating potential of education.

Commencing with an overview of the theoretical constructions of alienation and dominant policy responses, the paper proceeds to a sociological reading of the issue informed by Freire and critical educators. This is followed by an empirical account of the enabling and constraining factors in developing a pedagogy of engagement in a cluster of disadvantaged high schools. I conclude with some suggestions as to how educators might develop more politically engaged and critically reflective practices that are better equipped to address the systemic causes of youth alienation.

Alienation and student engagement: attributions of blame and policy fixes

The concept of 'alienation' was originally conceived as a metaphysical or theological phenomenon but has now acquired sociological and psychological meanings that encompass notions of separateness, isolation and estrangement of individuals from the modern world (Newman, 1981). Marx used the term in the nineteenth century to denote the profound separation of individuals from their true human nature – something which he associated with the rise of capitalist modes of production in which workers were effectively prevented from controlling their working conditions and the processes and products of their own labor (Martin, 2008). Arguing that the sociocultural and political structures of society reflect and support its economic base, Marx provided an explanation of ways in which schools tend to reproduce the inherent inequalities of the capitalist system. Substituting educational actors for economic actors, we can see that alienation occurs when students lack meaningful connection to their studies, when they see little relevance in the course content, and when they are effectively disconnected from other students through highly individualized forms of instruction (Martin, 2008, pp. 35–36). Assessment practices can be especially alienating, as Mann (2001) explains:

The work that is undertaken by students is not usually done for the good of the group of learners or other community, but in order to satisfy the requirements of the teacher and the institution and for the mark that may be obtained. (p. 13)

Explanations offered by Marx and Durkheim highlight unequal power relations and oppressive social and economic conditions as the underlying causes of alienation. However, the issue is more commonly understood in psychologistic terms that emphasize the internal state of individuals and the various dimensions of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement and social isolation which they experience (Newman, 1981, p. 547). Those subscribing to this view tend to attribute student estrangement and the associated problem of underachievement to the deficits and pathologies of individual students and their families, rather than any failings within schools and the political system (Dei, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Hursh, 2006). Alienated students are said to come from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' and supposedly lack the confidence, self-assurance, motivation and social capital to function effectively in school. Often they are consigned to an 'at-risk' category of students – those considered unlikely to achieve basic academic standards or, worse still, drop out of school. A tendency on the part of educators to individualize school success or failure tends to normalize this position (Dei, 2003).

Institutional responses to alienation involve a contradictory mix of measures, on the one hand encouraging support for middle school practices that foster belongingness, wellbeing and a sense of community, yet on the other hand implementing policies that are much more about controlling the behaviors of young people. Indicative of the coercive solutions to the problems of school retention are the legislative measures introduced in most Australian states and territories to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years, and in some instances to 17 years. Largely in the name of making Australia a more economically competitive country, individual students are to be kept at school whether they like it or not. For their part, schools are more inclined to engage in sorting and streaming practices in order to identify academic and/or talented students and to implement compensatory programs to cater for 'at-risk' students – those who do not fit into the mainstream. Although this may be guided by good intentions, it can be a recipe for a pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991), as already struggling students have their options further reduced. School authorities also have a tendency to see young people's behavior as the problem, rather than symptomatic of deeper social and educational concerns. The issue then is constructed as one of 'discipline' and 'classroom management' in order to deal with resistant behaviors exhibited by students (White, 1996). Students who 'buck' the system can be effectively shunted out of school through technologies of exclusion such as the 'three strikes and you're out' strategy.

There can be little doubt that many students' experience of alienation is profoundly shaped by personal and psychological factors, including physical and mental disabilities, but a good deal of the causes of disconnection and powerlessness experienced by young people are rooted in major social divides based on class, ethnicity and gender. Not surprisingly, 'it is the poor, the working class, the indigenous person, and the refugee who is invariably part of the most vulnerable and alienated layers of the population' both in society and in mainstream schooling (White, 1996, p. 26). As White points out, 'failure is a collective experience when we look at schooling outcomes on the basis of class, gender and ethnic backgrounds' (p. 26). These sociological explanations of alienation and student engagement lie at the heart of Freire's pedagogy of oppression and liberation.

A Freirean perspective on youth alienation and disengagement

More than a decade has passed since the death of Paulo Freire, but his philosophy and passion for social justice continue to be a source of inspiration and hope for educators. Freire devoted his life to an emancipatory ideal involving a personal commitment to the elimination of suffering and oppression, and the realization of a more just society in, and through, education. While a great deal of his early work was concerned with revolutionary literacy programs in his native Brazil and African countries, his writings and projects have meaning for educators and social activists that extends beyond the frontiers of the developing world.

Much of the original theory behind Freire's work is set out in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, first published in 1970 after he spent six months in political exile in Brazil. Freire claims that to be fully human in any meaningful sense is to be a subject – 'a conscious social actor who has the ability, the desire and the opportunity to participate in social and political life' (Frymer, 2005, p. 4). All men and women are the creators of culture, all have a right to 'name the world' (Freire, 1993, p. 69) and all have a capacity to look critically at the world. For Freire, history is never predetermined for there always exists the possibility of people acting collectively to change the world. However, subjectivity is negated by alienation when individuals and groups are so oppressed by dehumanizing social structures and conditions that they succumb to a sense of fatalism. Enveloped in a culture of silence, they come to accept that this is the way things are meant to be and they lose their transformative capacities.

Drawing on Marx's theory of alienation, Freire locates a major source of oppression within the classed nature of society and the material conditions of people's lives. Although his early writings referred to the oppression of the peasantry in Brazil, he makes it clear that oppression is a global phenomenon – that the Third World exists within the urban ghettos of cities like New York, as documented by Kozol (1991). He is especially critical of the impact of globalization and neoliberal governance on the poorest members of society. Exposing the contradictions and diseased reasoning in the so-called 'triumph of capitalism over socialism', he asks: 'what excellence is this [economic system] that manages to coexist with more than a billion inhabitants of the developing world that live in poverty' (Freire, 1994, p. 90). Freire's theory of objectification is not limited to economic factors but encompasses social and cultural forces of domination, such as patriarchy and racism that operate through the state, schools, families, the media and other agencies.

For Freire, the greatest task of oppressed people is to liberate themselves from the conditions which subjugate them. This is no mean feat since oppressed people are usually so dominated that they often have no conception of what it means to become an active subject. Many in fact live in fear of freedom. As a starting point, the oppressed must 'achieve a deepening awareness both of their social cultural reality that shapes their lives and their capacity to transform that reality' (Freire, 1985, p. 93). According to Freire, the path towards conscientization is essentially an 'educational project of radical humanization' (Frymer, 2005, p. 5), in which local communities become sites for transformation through solidarity and praxis – 'reflection and action' by the oppressed to changing their lives (p. 48).

Critical pedagogy

Freire attaches enormous weight to the possibilities of education for transforming unjust social relations. However, the kind of education he speaks of is not just a

process of socialization; rather it involves what Shor (1992, p. 15) describes as a 'critical pedagogy for self and social change'. Again, much of the original theory behind Freire's critical pedagogy is set out in *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1993), where he describes a prevailing 'banking concept' of schooling (p. 53) characterized by a deficit view of students and didactic teaching practices which position students as passive objects, rather than active subjects capable of changing the world. In such a school 'the teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly' (p. 54). Such a model of teaching and learning mirrors oppressive relations in society insofar as it denies student subjectivity and is more intent on preserving the status quo than in challenging unjust social relations.

Against this domesticating model, Freire juxtapositions an active problem-posing approach to education which abandons the depositing notion of knowledge in favor of dialogic learning in which students become co-constructors of knowledge and active critical investigators into their own lives and society. Freire (2001) asserts that teachers should respect what students know and take advantage of their knowledge of their own environment and culture in planning curriculum. Incorporating the interests and concerns of students into the curriculum is a necessary precondition for a critical pedagogy, but a truly liberating education challenges students to 'build a critical understanding of their presence in the world' (p. 75) and one that assists them to acquire knowledge and resources to engage in social activism.

Freire asserts most passionately that teaching is a political act. Rejecting the notion of neutral educators, he argues that in making pedagogical choices 'educators must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf they are working' (Freire, 1985, p. 180). His conception of teaching as an intellectual, ideological and transformative process is explored most fully in *Teachers as cultural workers* (1998), a text which challenges the adequacy of the widely accepted notion of teaching as an act of caring. In his most recent publication, *Pedagogy of indignation* (2004), Freire claims that one of the greatest obstacles to critical consciousness is 'the power of neoliberal ideology, whose perverse ethic is founded on the laws of the market' (Freire, 2004, p. 100), rather than any genuine commitment to democratic practices. Many educators, he maintains, have succumbed to the fatalism, pessimism and program of neoliberal doctrines which reduce educational practices to the technical-scientific training of learners, rather than authentic education (Freire, 2004, p. 19).

Contemporary youth alienation

Freire's notions of objectification, oppression and liberation are especially useful in trying to make sense of youth alienation and the disaffection that many students have with school. According to Frymer (2005, p. 1), drug use, teenage pregnancy, gangs, school dropouts, suicide, violence, political apathy, casual sex, rock and rap music and depression, may be viewed as symbolic manifestations of youth disaffection and estrangement. But even the general category of adolescence carries with it some widely shared (if somewhat irrational) perceptions about the unpredictability and instability of young people, often attributed to the biological, psychological, emotional and cognitive states of adolescent development. Young people are subject to demonizing discourses and notions such as 'youth at risk', and

adolescents as ‘a problem to be solved’ are entrenched in education policy documents, for example, *Turning points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Giroux (1996) calls attention to the moral panics generated by this demonizing discourse of youth identity and reminds us that social relations are embedded in discourses of politics, power and exclusion.

From Freire’s perspective, youth alienation can be understood in terms of ‘the separation of the subject from [an] ontological vocation of active human participation in the world’ (Frymer, 2005, p. 3): that is, young people who are subjugated by oppressive social, economic and cultural forces are denied any real sense of agency and lack a capacity to act on and change their world. While many of these forces of domination have a long history, new modes of dehumanization and objectification have arisen from late capitalism. In many respects, youth identity has become a commodity that is being bought by media conglomerates and sold back to youth themselves (p. 9). In the ‘society of the spectacle’ (p. 9), young people are ‘assigned value on the basis of how closely they resemble other objects of consumption’ (p. 13) – the pressure to wear designer clothes and be seen with the latest mobile phones being two expressions of this pressure. A saturation of youth consciousness by the media effectively undermines active political and social engagement on the part of youth as they are inclined to submit to the dominant images of society – images which are largely uninterrupted and subjected to little critical evaluation. Efforts to promote critical literacy seem especially relevant where student aspirations for the good life are often confined to gazing into shop windows for goods that lie outside their economic reach.

Oppressive schooling arrangements contribute to alienation, especially for the most marginalized students. Schools become complicit in the objectification of young people when learning is unconnected to their lives and aspirations, when they have little say in the choice of curriculum topics or how they might investigate them, when their teachers fail to engage them in a critical reading of their lives and the world at large, and when they have few opportunities for social activism. What is worth highlighting is a major contradiction between a rhetoric of constructivist learning that permeates curriculum policy documents and the reality of mandated standardized testing regimes that dictate what students must learn. In an introduction to *Pedagogy of freedom* (Freire, 2001), Aronowitz (p. 5) argues that the banking or transmission theory of knowledge is alive and well in American schools as the old notion of a liberal education has been replaced by a training model in which teachers teach to externally administered tests and students engage in meaningless rote learning. Such an environment is hardly conducive to the development of critical pedagogy in schools.

According to Freire, to be fully human is to be a subject capable of acting on and changing the world. If we deny subjectivity, silence student voices, show scant respect for children and their culture, suppress the creative capacities of individuals and close down spaces for inquiry, we are likely to reinforce existing patterns of alienation and disaffection amongst young people. Why would students want to learn in such an environment? Why would they not withdraw their assent? Based on Freire’s philosophy, Shor (1992, pp. 33–35) outlines an ‘empowering’ alternative pedagogy that incorporates (amongst other principles) a commitment to dialogic learning, democratic practices, critical reflection, student activism and multiculturalism.

What might such a pedagogy look like in practice? The next section discusses the enabling and constraining factors of pedagogy of engagement from an empirical study on school retention and student engagement in a region of Australia we are calling Bountiful Bay.

Pedagogies of engagement: from theory into action

The research informing this paper involved a ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus, 1998) of four senior secondary schools serving an industrial region characterized by relatively high levels of social dislocation, unemployment and poverty. Young people, particularly early school leavers (‘drop-outs’ in the United States vernacular), made up a disproportionate number of the unemployed. Concerned about falling retention rates, the education district and local schools had made student participation and engagement a major priority. Our research into these issues involved audiotaped conversations and semi-structured interviews with 125 participants (school leaders, teachers, students and community personnel), as well as fieldnotes and case records of an extensive phase of participant observation of classroom learning, professional learning forums and school events. Pseudonyms were assigned to informants to protect their identity.

What constrains student engagement?

In our conversations with teachers we heard of the difficulties of raising community expectations of education, of motivating and engaging significant numbers of seemingly apathetic students, and dealing with the fractured lives of young people and intrusions of violence and antisocial behavior into their classrooms. Some teachers were inclined to view these students through a deficit lens as evident in the following remarks: ‘we don’t have a lot of academic kids in our school’; ‘many of our parents don’t value education’; ‘staff often tell me that our kids are not motivated’. At the extreme edge of this thinking, a teacher reasoned ‘as a general rule 10% [of our students] are bums and 30% are lazy’. Students also internalized and participated in their own oppression. ‘I’m too dumb to go to university’, claimed a senior secondary student.

Although teachers did not use the term ‘alienation’ when referring to young people’s experience of schooling, they hinted at the damaging impact of community-based racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes on students. All schools had implemented anti-harassment policies and strategies, but schoolyard bullying remained a persistent problem. Other factors were also said to contribute to student estrangement, not the least being the state government’s decision to raise the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years of age – in effect to compel students to stay at school whether they want to or not. There was a strong view that coercive measures of this kind were unlikely to engage disaffected young people without a major investment in resources to support curriculum development, school organization and teachers’ learning. In the absence of viable pathways and engaging courses, students under compulsion commonly withdrew their labor from the learning process. A teacher describes how this political act was played out:

We have a small number of students who come into the school but don’t sign in. We have a second group who sign on but don’t come to class. There is a third group who

come to some classes only, and we have a fourth group who go to all classes but don't engage. (Teacher)

In some ways, the 'cherry-picking response' of the third group affirms the crucial role of dedicated and passionate teachers in sustaining the interest and commitment of students to some aspects of their learning when all else seems uninspiring and irrelevant. Tricia, a senior school student, summed up her attitude in the following words:

Schooling has got absolutely nothing to do with my life ... school is a dump. I only come to school because of the horticulture course. It's the people who make the difference.

Teachers explained that their greatest challenge was to engage students in intellectually demanding and relevant learning that connected closely with their lives and communities. Although they still had some freedom in the choice of study topics and instructional methods, many indicated that they were under some pressure to teach to the test, to quantify improvements in student outcomes against targets, to comply with uniform and somewhat narrow provisions of assessment and reporting practices, and to redefine educational objectives around the needs of industry. In the face of new accountability requirements, many were trying to navigate a pathway between system requirements and their own knowledge of what actually works for students in their own community. Largely missing from teacher explanations was a recognition of the debilitating effects of poverty and social exclusion on the lives of students or of the alienating nature of much of the high school curricula – the point emphasized by Tricia.

What enhances student engagement?

Despite these limitations, there was evidence of innovative and engaging programs within these schools. We observed committed and caring teachers who fostered respectful relationships and developed a strong sense of connection to students' lives and communities. Many of these teachers incorporated generative themes into the curriculum arising from popular culture, the arts, local heritage, the physical environment and new technologies. To varying degrees, they affirmed student agency by viewing them as constructors of their own knowledge and language, rather than being passive recipients of some externally imposed curriculum. They were prepared to hang in with the most demanding students when all else seemed lost. What follows is a selection of teacher stories which reveal elements of a critical pedagogy of engagement.

Tom, one of the youngest teachers interviewed in the study, was an English/humanities teacher with a keen interest in popular culture. In this narrative he discusses the importance of teachers connecting to the lifeworlds of students.

Last year I had a group of troublesome year 9 students – mostly boys. Ninety-eight per cent of the class watched *OC (Orange County)* on TV and it was impossible to stop them from talking about it on Wednesday morning. So I decided to set aside 15 minutes at the start of the lesson for discussion about the events of the previous episode. Most kids responded well but a few thought it was spoiled by having to analyse it. I find that kids tend to engage more with popular culture; for example, surfing. It makes it much easier to understand sub-cultures if you talk about the things that interest them. The term 'awesome' is reserved for those teachers who allow kids to have some fun in their classes but kids know they have to work – they can't get away with doing nothing. Kids don't

like ‘mean’ teachers. They like teachers who are flexible. Kids are bored with the functionalist approach in the vocational English course. I try to give them more control over what they are doing in the classroom and work more on an individual basis with kids. I allow for free time in class as well – go outside for a walk or play some sport. The key thing for me is associating with the students on a personal level. I am interested in who they are and what they do. Unfortunately, we have a number of ‘taggers’ in the school and if you talk about a piece to them you give them some freedom in terms of what they’re writing about in the creative writing session. One of the first things I did when I had the class was to get them to write an autobiography. This gave me an idea of who’s who. Some kids put a lot of emotion into their accounts. I also get them to read a lot in class; for example, the writing of Stephen King. They learn that a certain amount of profanity and coarse language is okay in certain circumstances. I throw in a few personal stories here and there and they see that I can be honest and open so they have a go. (Tom, 27 July 2005)

Freire (1994) argues that progressive educators need to understand how children read the world as the first step towards the development of critical consciousness. Rather than seeing the students’ obsession with a popular TV show as an intrusion into his teaching program, Tom took advantage of a teachable moment to engage with students at the point of immediate interest. He also grasped the opportunity to connect with students through a surfing sub-culture and the marine environment. Engaging pedagogies in this instance involved a willingness on the part of the teacher to reveal something of himself and the courage to allow students to write about topics close to their own hearts – even when these might be considered off limits by some educators.

Our next informant, Sonya, describes how she engages a group of senior school girls in a challenging and personally fulfilling curriculum area that is often neglected in schools.

My passion is dance. I use the latest music, not so much in performances but in warm-up activities. Kids love hip hop tracks so I tend to make use of that. I still make them do ballet in year 11, whether they hate it or not, but we do modern dance as well. We do lots of group work and teambuilding. Girls feel much more comfortable performing as part of a team. The girls love acting, especially in senior years, and they get a sense of identity through their involvement in the dance program. Having fun is important. I listen to kids a lot. I like to find out what they’re interested in. I’ll often ask them how their soccer match went or something like that. It turns out better for me anyway because they work better for you because they think you’re interested in them. You’re not just one of those teachers who goes, ‘Oh well, you’re here ... good ... well sit down over there’. Friendship is a really important part of the dance program. There’s a lot of interaction and they get a lot of confidence and self-esteem out of dance. They become more responsible and acquire a lot of team skills. They also improve their level of fitness. I take a lot of pride in my work and I expect the girls to give me the same respect. During the first few weeks I get them to do sit-ups and push-ups until they almost start crying. I tell them that if they want to leave the program that’s fine and I won’t take it personally. But I don’t lose a lot. Most hang in. Sometimes my year 11s say: ‘This dance routine is too hard’, but when I say: ‘Okay I can give you an easier one if you like’, they invariably say: ‘Oh no, we’ll get it eventually’. There are some girls who would leave school if it weren’t for the dance program. A lot are involved in other programs but dance is what really brings them to school. (Sonya, 28 July 2005)

Sonya’s students gain a great deal from dance in terms of fitness, fun, friendship, self-confidence and a sense of identity. The girls are challenged and extended in rigorous ways, but they hang in because their learning has real purpose and meaning. Dance gives them power and opportunities to express their creative talents in personally fulfilling and publicly affirming ways. This is especially important in a

masculine school culture largely revolving around Australian Rules football. Sonya believes that student culture, experience and interests should be the focus of the curriculum and it was apparent from students' comments that her ability to tap into their lifeworlds kept them engaged with schooling.

The third example is a maritime history project undertaken by Jenny, a teacher of society and environment. In this snapshot of place-based learning, she describes how, with the support of local organisations, her students designed a heritage trail to replace a rather badly faded art work along the seafront of their neighborhood. The project engaged students in a creative and community-oriented work of public art that tapped into local culture and heritage and drew on the funds of knowledge in the community. By creating spaces for students to research significant historical themes and to organize their own displays, Jenny encouraged them to view themselves as makers and writers of history, not just as writers representing someone else's views of history.

The aim was to create a series of plaques commemorating people, organizations and events in the city's history. Artists were commissioned to work with a group of my year 10 students to design and construct the murals and markers with information about pioneer families, maritime and forest industries, and environmental themes. Students were given an overview of the community's rich history and were organized in groups, with each group being responsible for researching a particular aspect of local history, such as shipping and shipwrecks, settlement and trade and the timber industry. Research was followed up by a visit to the local museum where students could engage in displays. It is here that they gained the inspiration for their drawing on paintings, photographs, models and objects that were on display. Original sketches were taken back to class where they were refined and further research was conducted. Students made a powerpoint presentation displaying their designs with a summary of their meaning and significance. A presentation was made to all involved at the local council. The students were very focused and proud of their achievements. (Jenny, 5 August 2005)

It's student-centered but is it critical pedagogy?

It would be misleading to suggest that teachers in this study practiced all the elements of the kind of critical pedagogy advocated by Freire and Shor. Although some had taken steps towards a culturally relevant and experientially based curriculum, there was less evidence of critically reflective practices. Concerned about the extent of bullying of apprentices in some local businesses, a parent claimed that not enough was done to educate students about their industrial rights in vocational education courses. Remarks of this kind support research findings by Simon, Dippo and Schenke (1991) that many school students are uninformed about the role of trade unions, the changing nature of work, structural unemployment, power relations, health and safety issues, child labor, industrial legislation, and wages and conditions. Clearly some teachers had drawn on community funds of knowledge to promote place-based learning, but there was little indication that students were involved in a critical reading of the environmental, cultural and economic make-up of their communities. Questions such as: 'Whose culture and heritage are reflected in the monuments, galleries and public buildings? Which groups are missing or undervalued? What might we do to redress the imbalance?' did not feature prominently in local history studies. Although many teachers built curriculum around student interests they failed to connect generative themes to issues of oppression and injustice in the lives of students and communities.

Perhaps a lack of reflective practices in the research sites is to be expected in an institutional/policy context dominated by standardized testing regimes, mandated and vocationally driven curricula and authoritarian solutions to the issues of student engagement and school retention. However, it also says something about teachers' hegemonic ideology, particularly the powerful grip of instrumental reason and technical rationality in shaping conceptions of teachers' work. For many teachers, the question of 'what works' in practice appears to take precedence over theory when it comes to the design curriculum and pedagogy. Moreover, there is a tendency to eschew sociological explanations of educational inequalities in favor of psychological traits and highly individualized solutions. 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.

So what is required to build on a student-centered curriculum to promote a critical pedagogy of engagement? Firstly, studies of popular culture need to move beyond mere endorsement and celebration of young people's interests and pursuits to a critical examination of the impact of consumerism, new technologies and the media on their identities. Secondly, place-based learning should incorporate a critical dimension that encourages educators and young people to examine the inequitable structures and oppressive relationships within communities (Gruenewald, 2003). In this context, teachers can assist students to gain an understanding of social justice issues by encouraging them to connect their everyday habits and local issues to global concerns, such as climate change, water scarcity, poverty and trade (Bigelow & Petersen, 2002). Thirdly, students can be encouraged to think critically about what actions they could take to make a difference within their own communities. We saw examples of ecological projects in the research sites that might serve as models for critically engaged forms of learning in other areas of the curriculum. Fourthly, teachers could implement a far more critical approach to vocational education by challenging some of the commonsense assumptions about training and employment and engaging students in dialogue about the values that enhance meaningful work, political democracy and civic engagement (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009).

Concluding comments

It is claimed that Freire's pedagogy can foster critical consciousness by engaging students in dialogue about their everyday concerns and 'encouraging them to make connections with the broader exploitative social structures and relationships' (Martin, 2004, p. 2). To what extent this is possible in traditional high schools is problematic. Clearly a group of socially engaged educators in the research sites had been able to engender a sense of hope and possibility in the lives of some of the most marginalized students. In nurturing an ethos of community and trusting relationships, they had taken an important first step towards a critical pedagogy of engagement. However, addressing the systemic cause of alienation demands a whole school/community response to the oppressive conditions confronting young people. It cannot be left to the heroic efforts of individual teachers. Organizational and cultural changes within schools, together with a much greater emphasis on collaborative and critically reflective forms of teacher learning, are necessary to transform schooling for the most disaffected students.

Enacting critical pedagogy will not change the material conditions of students' lives that are a major source of alienation (Shor & Freire, 1987). This is especially true for those students who live in dire poverty, are drug-dependent, suffer from mental illness, and are victims of abuse and neglect. In the long term, alienation can only be eliminated by 'building a more economically equitable society' (Berliner, 2006, p. 988). However, critical pedagogy can help to expose the injustices in their lives and the wider community. Whilst schools may be complicit in perpetuating social injustices, hegemony is never completely secure and educational institutions can play a pivotal role in contesting inequitable practices, especially in the arena of culture (Hoare & Smith, 1971). There are spaces for teachers to challenge the status quo within the confines of their schools and communities. Notwithstanding the obstacles described previously, critical educators should not give up in their efforts to work for more inclusive, politically engaged and socially just curriculum; nor should they discount the importance of working collaboratively with labor unions, professional associations and social movements to defend public education, work for social justice and build more equitable communities. By combining a critical pedagogy with a strong sense of community activism, educators can make a significant contribution to alleviating the extent of alienation experienced by many young people in schools.

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