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The *Socially Just School* and critical pedagogies in communities *put at a disadvantage*

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Abstract

Public schools around the world have been hijacked and deformed beyond recognition by the forces of the economy over the past three decades. This paper provides an analysis and a way out of this miasma around the notion of the *socially just school*. While not another prescription, this orientation is argued to be the most hopeful possibility for those parts of the community that have lost the most through the spot-welding of schools onto the economy.

What is the mold that has to be broken, and why?

We are fast approaching a tipping point in education in western countries. Our current infatuation with the neoliberal project is waning due to the way it has been thoroughly discredited as a consequence of the global financial crisis, and according to Hatcher (2007), the marketized, standards-based, accountability-driven phase around the attempt to quasi-privatise schools is being reworked and replaced by a no less neoliberal version of creativity. As Hatcher says, notwithstanding, this may be the best opportunity we have had in several decades to pursue the notion of the socially just school as an alternative.

This is not the place for me to go into a full-blown critique of neoliberalism, but I need to parlay with it a little in order to start to sketch out an alternative.

Invoking the work of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) on what is coming to be known as the 'new sociology of inequality', Livingstone (2009) says that the basic question to be pursued is 'why does equality matter?' In a fuller treatment of this (Smyth et al, 2010), we argue along similar lines that inequality brings with it increasing social distance and that certain things follow:

- The nature of the social relations in society change markedly, and not towards collective betterment.
- Where there are feelings of superiority and inferiority, then rates of violence, homicides and crime are higher.
- Where ties and forms of communication are more vertical rather than horizontal, then there is less concern for community life and civic mindedness.
- Where there is increased emphasis on competition and individual acquisitiveness, then there are greater levels of social stress as people strive to emulate those socially and economically above them.
- Social anxiety becomes greater when people feel shamed, embarrassed, humiliated, disrespected or diminished in the eyes of others (pp. 69-70).

What these tendencies produce is a particular set of challenges for schools. As social institutions, public schools are being relentlessly assailed through league tables and other totally inappropriate accountability regimes, in ways that attenuate and exacerbate the effects of inequality, damaging the least advantaged students even further.

According to research in Victoria, Australia, the effect of more than two decades of neoliberalism on disadvantaged schools has been demonstrable and devastating, to the point of 'residualisation' and 'ghettoization' of these schools, 'denuding' and converting them into 'shadows of their former selves' (Lamb 2007, p. 18). This research shows that:

The market-driven reforms during the 1990s giving schools greater flexibility and increased local control did help invigorate government schools in the wealthier areas. They were able to muscle-up against their robust competitive private sector counterparts [in Australia around 37 percent of all students are in the private sector] and increase mean enrolments. But it has occurred at the expense of government schools in low SES areas which shed numbers at a continuous rate (ibid, p. 17).

The 'creaming effect', as the most able students in low SES areas are drained off, has been dramatic:

...students living near and travelling away from low SES schools in northern Melbourne to attend a school in another region increased from 1994 to 2004 by about 8 percentage points. In 2004, every fifth student living in a suburb served by a low SES school travelled each day to attend a school in another region. These students did not travel to attend a low SES school. The majority leaving their region did so to attend middle and high SES schools...This is consistent with the view ...of market-driven school reform [powered by] parental choice...(ibid., p. 22).

Working our way out of residualisation

We are beginning to see much more clearly now, as some of us have been predicting for quite some time, the effects of residualisation on poor schools:

- "it leave(s) them with higher concentrations of the most disadvantaged students"
- [as a result] "low SES schools [have] to deal with multiple categories of need"
- these "multiple layers of disadvantage compound the difficulties [of] teaching and learning" (Lamb, 2007, pp. 23-4)

As flow-on effects:

- the perception is reinforced that these are difficult schools, and as teachers shy away from them, they become even harder to staff
- the notion of an "achievement gap" and a "culture of failure" (Alonso, Anderson, Su & Theoharis, 2009) is constructed, that is sheeted home as evidence of personal, familial or cultural inadequacies.

None of these tendencies can be reversed by schools on their own. The sources of the damaging effects of inequality and poverty are deeply rooted and structural in nature. Neither is this to suggest that these schools are complete basket cases and that we should give up on them. On the contrary, there is all the more reason to construct an alternative that is capable of speaking back to the current totally inappropriate policy trajectory. In other words, we need a very different educational 'imagination' upon which to build an insurgent response.

It does not advance matters at all to continue to follow so-called 'flagship' initiatives like *Fresh Start* in the UK (Araujo, 2005; 2009) which promise more of the same by continuing to harangue schools about standards and zero tolerance, treating them in demeaning ways, imposing 'super heads', and engaging in facile makeovers like changing school names—all of which are thinly disguised attempts to get more muscular and tackle supposed 'under-performance'. We need an altogether different kind of 'fresh start', building upon the demonstrable strengths many of these schools have, within their communities, and the strong identity they have of themselves. But first, we have to deal with a new kid on the block that is causing a lot of damage.

The recent distraction of Ruby Payne and why we need the *Socially Just School*

The notion of the socially just school, which I will get to shortly, is needed at the moment, in part, to deflect attention away from the damaging, thin, demeaning, pathologizing and one-size-fits-all "culture of poverty" views being peddled and imposed upon schools by American educational entrepreneur Ruby Payne (1998[2005]).

I argue, as Winters and Cowie (2009) do within social work, that as educational professionals we are "ethically bound to reject [Payne's] *Framework* on the grounds that it reduces the economically disadvantaged to a subhuman class, economically as well as socially" (p. 2).

Another way of thinking about this is to say that, as educators, we have a wider calling to be "culturally competent" to assess, to understand, and to work humanely with whatever diversity of people and backgrounds are present in schools. We are under a social contract not to disparage, stereotype, or demean but rather to learn from students and their families and 'make meaningful connections'. As Winters and Cowie (2009) put it:

...mutual trust and respect between...individuals from diverse social backgrounds can [only] be fostered through respectful and empathetic communication (p. 3).

Anything less than this runs the risk of putting us as educators in the category of being culturally illiterate.

The more we refuse to understand the culture of schools *put at a disadvantage*, how they came to be that way, and what keeps them that way, then the more we are susceptible to the snake oil put around by people like Ruby Payne. Frameworks of the kind she purveys are predicated on not having to engage with or listen to the complexity of people's lives—it is considered easier to just adopt what somebody else says is the case. The problem is that, while such approaches might seem to offer easy 'solutions', the complexity of schools in contexts of poverty is not struggled with on a case-by-case basis, and the real relationships needed to change such situations are never actually formed. What we have instead are inauthentic and pale imitations. The people whose lives are involved are excluded, silenced, marginalized and ridden over. Unless we engage in the kind of cross-cultural communication and "learning about and respecting the individual for the sake of forging meaningful connections" (Winters and Cowie, 2009, p. 8), then what we end with is engaging in activities that are as shallow and hollow of meaning as a business transaction.

What then are the features of the *Socially Just School*?

This is an area in which there are no recipes or formulae, and even talking about the notion of the *socially just school* is to shy away from presenting a model and instead revealing something of an aspirational pastiche of impressions and fragments garnered from a variety of places. One of these is the more than 25 multi-sited ethnographies I have undertaken and published since about 1997. What I will present therefore is very tentative and incomplete, and is something of a constellation of orienting elements that might point towards the beginnings of an archetype of the *socially just school*. I make no claim to exclusive knowledge in this area, and will intersect my work with that of others who have pushed this idea further than myself.

One thing that can be said about these schools, and it is borne out of their contexts of disadvantage, is that they have a *clear and decisive mission or philosophy* as to what they are about. They understand that their *raison d'être* is about creating the conditions necessary to improve the life chances of the most excluded and marginalized. To that extent they have a very well developed sense of justice and an understanding of injustice.

These are schools that *regard themselves as having agency*. They don't allow themselves to be constructed as victims, nor do they see themselves as being primarily beholden to, or being driven unthinkingly, by outsiders' agenda. In a sense they regard their students and families as having been *put in* the state they are in because of the playing out of the social, political and economic agenda of

others who are more powerful. In this respect they operate strategically - one might argue, courageously and fearlessly - in advancing the interests of their students and communities in ways that try to minimise further damage or ameliorate the worst excesses of what has been *done to them*. Far from benign or neutral, these schools have a clear sense of the political work they are engaged in.

They are also schools that seem *not to have an overblown or overwhelming concern or pre-occupation with their own self-image or self-importance*—which is stunningly refreshing in this synthetic era of posturing and image and impression management aimed at ensuring ‘market share’. They understand who they are, they are comfortable and secure with this image, and unashamedly present themselves to the outside world for what they authentically are, rather than as facsimiles.

The unassailable attitudinal and dispositional attribute that distinguishes the *socially just school* from other schools, is that they *regard disadvantage as being socially constructed*. That is to say, they do not regard it as an inalienable, natural or unalterable state of affairs, in which students, parents and the community have deficits that have to be remedied or fixed. Rather, they think in terms of the need to locate the sources of the forces that have made them this way, of the need to better understand how these forces work, how they need to be confronted, and in the end transformed. In that regard, these schools are *activist places*.

Part of this dispositional status resides in the way these schools think and act towards their students, families and communities—rather than seeing them as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’, both of which bring with them dependency status, on the one hand of ‘being serviced’, and on the other of engaging in an extractive transaction—these schools regard their constituents as ‘valued members’. What this means practically-speaking is having a *personal rather than an institutional relationship* in which the school gets to intimately know the strengths, struggles, aspirations and histories that students and their families bring to the school. Put another way, these are schools that *bring peoples’ lives into the school* - students, parents, and members of the community - rather than creating walls and moats around the institution of the school. They are places that value diversity and view this as a major and undeniable aspect of their strength, rather than seeing it in terms of deficits. They see troubling inheritances as challenges to be worked with, rather than insurmountable interferences or obstacles.

The socially just school, like many of its aspirational equivalents under other names, for example, ‘schools of hope’ (Wrigley, 2003), has a *‘success-oriented approach’ to learning* (McInerney, 1999; Smyth & McInerney, 2007a, p. 200). That is to say, they regard students and communities as capable of learning and achieving despite much handwringing by others outside of these schools about alleged under-performance. The problem with benchmarks and standards is that they demonstrably fail to take account of the context, skill sets, attributes, ways of learning, and strengths that don’t always fit with conventional ways. To that extent, these are schools that are intent on celebrating

and re-making an identity that is much more consistent with the richness of the resources and histories that communities of disadvantage bring, while also being mindful of where they have come from. There is a strong sense that these schools regard their students and families as vibrant and rich sources of resources, rather than bundles of pathologies to be remedied or rectified.

One element that constitutes a radical departure and that goes to the very essence of the socially just school is the *commitment to working in innovative ways*—and for good reason. Conventional ways simply do not work in these schools, and they have to be adept at analysing their contexts, pinpointing the issues, recasting things, and devising local solutions that often constitute radically different ways of operating to improve the life chances of their students. Approaches that may work in middle class schools and that rely on docile forms of compliance, even boredom, are unlikely to have much currency in settings of disadvantage. The starting point in socially just schools is altogether different. They recast themselves as *listening organizations* with a commitment to giving students, parents, and families authentic voice in shaping their futures and how they go about learning.

While these are schools that can be brought into existence, thrive, flourish, and have ideas that grow, evolve and refocus from within, equally this can present one of their major drawbacks—their *transience and heavy reliance on transformative activist leaders* who speak them into existence and who can disappear as quickly as they appear. They can exist and flourish for quite extended periods - for example Harmony School (Goodman, 1992; Goodman, Baron & Myers, 2001) and Emily Carr Elementary School (McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Vibert, Portelli, Shields & Larocque, 2002; Smyth, 2008); equally they can vanish just as quickly without a trace, usually as a consequence of being 'done in' by destructive neoliberal regimes - see for example Richmond Road School (May, 1994; 1995) and Plainsville (Smyth & McInerney, 2007b).

We can get a sense of the uniqueness of the socially just school when we look closely at how they deal with a number of significant issues. In respect of *externally generated educational policy*, which oftentimes they find inhospitable or anathema because of the way it is designed in the interests of the already advantaged, these schools are often quite strategic in how they respond. Because they have a well developed sense of philosophy and mission, they recast the external initiative around their guiding mission, asking the question: *how might this work in the interests of the least advantaged?* In other words, rather than outright resistance, their approach is one of getting inside whatever the policy is and re-working it in the interests of their students and communities.

Another instance is *the way they approach classroom discipline*. The conventional view is that this is a behaviour management issue, and the way to handle it is bear down harshly on recalcitrant students and demand conformity. The socially just school, for the most part, recasts discipline issues in quite a different way—it regards student disengagement from classroom learning as, often, an indication of *a disengaging curriculum*. In other words, responsibility is directed to what is on offer

to students as requiring change, rather than always having to alter the actions of the student. When students cannot see the relevance of the curriculum to their lives, or that of their families and communities, it follows that there is an enhanced likelihood of disengagement and disconnection. No amount of haranguing students and chastising them is likely to work in the long term if the curriculum is inappropriate. A shorthand way of referring to this is “a curriculum of life” (Portelli & Vibert, 2002).

Socially just schools take considerable pride in foregrounding their mission of *improving the life chances* of their students, families and communities. In this regard they set high expectations and standards and have a curriculum and pedagogy that is consistent with these. Compared with externally devised accountability standards regimes, these schools don’t underpin this with punitive and retributive sanctions—rather they see it as emerging from the moral mission of the school, around redressing limited opportunities and improving life chances. For example, these schools actively confront the politically expedient shibboleth that “these kids are not capable of academic learning, and therefore must be forced to endure an inferior vocational alternative”. These schools are able to see through the class-based sorting mechanism that lies at the heart of much *so-called vocational education*, and they disavow this by engaging their students with a rigorous and relevant curriculum. A particular challenge is developing sophisticated ways of making connections from where students are at in their lives, and developing an educational imagination around ‘big ideas’—they don’t see these as mutually exclusive. In other words, they are not schools that give in to the inevitability of a dumbed-down vocational curriculum that equips their students only for low-level, insecure, poorly paid, menial, or non-existent jobs. They regard such a degraded response as an abrogation of their moral responsibility and as a mark of *institutional failure* on their part.

By way of tying some of this together, there is a constellation of three broad ‘generative themes’ (Freire, 1972) that have to be foregrounded:

Community oriented

- knowing the community in terms of its strengths as well as its challenges
- regarding students’ lives as requiring to be a crucial part of the curriculum
- supporting and fostering indigenous leadership from within the community
- having a genuine affection and liking for disadvantaged students/families
- finding ways to continually elevate and celebrate working class identity

Activist and political

- a willingness to engage in political action when necessary

- taking asymmetries of power seriously
- speaking back to entrenched interests
- acting as a buffer for teachers against damaging policies
- working out how to turn external policies back on themselves
- challenging harmful stereotypes and deficit narratives
- teaching students and community how to 'speak back' to injustices

Pedagogically engaged

- regarding the community as a valuable resource
- having high levels of trust in a context of safety to take risks
- a preparedness to confront and deal with controversial issues
- having the courage to be innovative
- being prepared to 'cut slack' and bend rules for students
- creating a culture in which it is safe for the school and community to be reflective
- providing students with an expanded range of experiences

Some of the interferences to the *Socially Just School*

While there is remarkable consistency in these ideas from place to place, even across national boundaries, much less clear or spoken about are the factors that can militate against them for schools that are 'Living on the edge' (Smyth & McInerney, 2007b). It may be a helpful way of concluding this chapter to focus somewhat more directly on what inhibits schools from going down the kind of pathway I have been arguing for. I have framed the commitments of the socially just school as encompassing the following:

- (1) giving students significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways;
- (2) supporting teachers and schools in giving up some control and handing it over to students; (3) fostering an environment in which people are treated with respect and trust rather than fear and threats of retribution;
- (4) pursuing a curriculum that is relevant and that connects to young lives;
- (5) endorsing forms of reporting and assessment that are authentic to learning;
- (6) cultivating an atmosphere of care around relationships;
- (7) promoting a flexible pedagogy that acknowledges the diversity of young lives; and,
- (8) celebrating school cultures that are open to and welcoming of students' lives and backgrounds regardless of the problems or where they come from (Smyth & McInerney, 2007b, p. 1163).

The question to be asked in all this is: *why are these ideas so difficult to lodge, implement, and sustain in disadvantaged schools?* One way of coming at this question is through what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) calls the notion of the “good school”. Good schools are, in her terms, ones that have “compelling organizational themes” (p. 25) of the kind indicated in the list above. These are a compelling constellation of ideas but they encounter obstacles from a number of quarters, not least the inhospitable way they are often treated systemically, or even ridden over by school effectiveness and neoliberal school reform agenda.

Some of the compelling organizational themes for the *Socially Just School*, and concomitantly that can most profoundly militate against it, emerge out of two particular “storylines” (Misher, 1999). Storylines go beyond the mere features or elements of such schools by embracing ‘continuities’, ‘disjunctions’, ‘discontinuities’, ‘tensions’, ‘contradictions’, and ‘individual’ and ‘relational conceptions of identity’ (p. xv) and how such schools ‘speak [their] identities’ into existence (p. 19).

One of these storylines - generally absent in the management-speak of school effectiveness - is the word ‘courage’, and the kind of ‘leadership’ that goes with it. To use a metaphor, where the playing field has been unfairly tilted, there are some ideals you have to courageously stand up for. Four in particular come to mind.

First, having the courage to admit, as in the case of the school I have called *Plainsville* (Smyth & McInerney, 2007b), that what the school was doing was not working in the interests of the students. They are places that are in many respects fearless—they know they have little to lose and much to gain from changing existing arrangements.

Second, being prepared to take a stand, as *Plainsville* did, against the irrelevance, even the damaging effects, of the dominant middle class model of schooling, and to pursue and supplant this dominant one-size-fits-all model with a more hospitable, local, vernacular grassroots alternative. For example, by asking questions like

- why are these students labelled ‘disadvantaged’ and by whom?
- why is this community stereotyped in deficit ways?
- who gains from misleading portrayals of this kind?
- how can we demonstrate existing strengths on our terms?

In part this also involves being able to puncture misleading myths, for example, the commonly held and limited view that poverty is only about material deprivation, and insisting that it is also about power and relationships.

Third, having the courage to listen to the voices of the school, the students, the teachers, parents, and the community even when these run quite counter to the direction of systems imperatives. This can be extremely difficult because these are not what are considered to be authoritative voices.

Fourth, and finally, forming cogent arguments and tactics with which to contest externally determined and imposed standards, benchmarks, league tables, and the like, and in their place presenting alternative visions around which these schools are prepared to be measured - for example, demonstrating how far students have developed as human beings, how they think about themselves and work with their communities and the wider world, and the successes of the school in “firing up the imaginations of students” (Smyth & McNerney, 2007b, p. 1164) around “big ideas”.

Having the courage of these convictions also requires some companion leadership skills as well. It means being analytical in envisaging alternatives beyond the impoverished and diminished educational ideas that are mostly on offer, as well as having the person skills to be able to convince others to make the changes based largely on the perspectives of voices normally silenced in school reform - students and parents. Equally crucial is knowing when and how to move forward with radical change, at a pace capable of carrying people along without losing them or leaving them behind. While it might seem paradoxical,

exercising leadership of this kind involves giving people a degree of control over their own destiny, which is to say, ownership.

One of the most crucial aspects of leadership in schools with a commitment to advancing the life chances of the most marginalized students is continually pursuing a ‘negotiated set of common understandings about children and how they learn [and placing these] at the center of everything...and continually subject[ing] those ideas to interrogation, dialogue and debate’ (Smyth & McNerney, 2007b, p. 1164). When promoting ‘success-oriented forms of learning’ and identifying what students *can do*, rather than castigating and punishing them for what they cannot, this becomes a major counter to deficit and victim-blaming narratives and harmful stereotypes.

Finally, in these neoliberal times, having a clear philosophical and moral compass becomes fundamental to exercising what Thomson (2002) calls ‘tactical mediation of policy’ (p. 138)—or, going past outright resistance to mandated and imposed policies and instead re-interpreting external policies in ways that enable the school to achieve its wider mission of enabling students to become “educated persons” (Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996). In my study of Newstart Primary School (Smyth, 2002, invoking Convery, 1999: 135), I saw this as an instance of ‘a principled self struggling against oppositional forces’ (p. 480) - one of the defining hallmarks of the *socially just school*.

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