

*We don't need  
no thought's control*

#### Description:

How might a public high school implement 'social justice' in a market-driven age? Broken Bridges High is an imaginary South Australian 'rustbelt' school struggling to survive in a neo-liberal landscape. As such, this article endeavours to *imagine* what staff, students, parents, and caregivers might do to put 'social justice' back on the school map. Although Broken Bridges High is fictional, the resulting texts are based on 'real-life' issues and dilemmas, and are themselves examples of how this imaginary school has gone about understanding and implementing social justice reforms. In this sense the article represents a merging of social science and creative writing as it endeavours to contextualise theoretical concerns in an everyday setting. Different texts and different textual strategies are combined to draw attention to the plight of (some) public schools in Australia today. The article opens with a letter to staff and is followed by a discussion paper on how social justice might be understood and implemented in the contemporary context. These suggestions could help *real* teachers in *real* schools facing similar dilemmas.

*Fuck the norm  
fuck the norm*

*No dark sarcasm in the classroom*



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**Broken Bridges High School**  
WORLDSEND ROAD, MARROWBONE  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA 5111

Friday, 29.9.06

Dear Staff

As you are aware, the **Curriculum Committee** has been undertaking research into the nature of schooling in Australia in recent weeks. Staff and community concerns about the deterioration of Broken Bridges High over the last decade, including funding cuts, declining enrolments, curriculum cutbacks, and increased vandalism, truancy, violence, and poverty, fuelled this endeavour. Given these concerns, we applied for funding to look into 'Social Justice and Schooling in the Southern Suburbs', but were refused because our research did not relate to literacy or numeracy. We argued that our concerns were even *more* urgent than literacy and numeracy as these skills can only be acquired if students are happy and healthy and attending a well resourced school. Our concerns were ignored. Thankfully, the Flinders University Social Justice Research Collective (SJRC) responded to our plight and sponsored a Parent-Caregiver-School research paper into the problem. Our research attempts to understand current thinking on 'social justice' and the current educational climate. Our findings, which have been translated into 5 languages for parents and caregivers, are attached. Given the complicated nature of this research, the Curriculum Committee will hold a professional development forum explaining our findings in two weeks time – followed by a community meeting that evening. Details of the forum will be announced.

We see this paper as a beginning point rather than a final solution. Therefore, suggestions and contributions are welcome. Our aim is to present forum findings to the SRC, the School Council, and parents and caregivers at a 'community meeting' on Wednesday, October 11, at 7 pm in the school gymnasium, where we will begin the first of our reform initiatives based on group discussions and community networking (Connell, 1997; McInerney, 2004). A more succinct version of this letter and research has been sent to parents and caregivers.

We invite you (and your family) to attend this meeting. Refreshments will be provided. We plan to hold similar meetings in the weeks and months ahead, and look forward to your help in building a better school.

Yours Sincerely,

Endorsed,

Andrew Miller  
(Teacher)

Laura Jones  
(Parent & School Council)

Miranda Smith  
(Principal)

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## "Social Justice and Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"

Staff Discussion Paper

Curriculum Committee



*Broken Bridges High School and the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) have spent \$250,000 in the last three months removing graffiti from our school. In addition, we have spent further time and energy expelling and excluding students for vandalism, truancy, drug possession, violence, and other anti-social activities. Never before has our school experienced so much anger and frustration from students, parents, caregivers, and teachers. DECS will spend tens-of-thousands more to build a fence around the school to keep future vandals out. In short, our school is becoming more like a detention centre than a place of learning and inspiration. Just imagine how many teachers, resources, and curriculum initiatives we could have funded had we allocated these resources to students rather than response measures. We believe the school has been responding to these problems in the wrong way. Rather than helping students, such strategies have simply removed offenders and erased evidence – but ignored the problem. We need to find out **why** our school community is suffering and what we can do to help it. This is our challenge in the current education climate.*

'Until the early 1980s, most recurrent federal education spending still went to public schools but by 1996, 55 percent was being allocated to private schools. That figure had ballooned to 74 percent by 2006, even though only 32 percent of pupils were attending private schools. ... In the case of schools, Howard's greatest achievement has been to bias federal grants heavily in favour of private schools – particularly the least needy (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, pp. 321-322).

### Social Justice & the Mass Schooling Machine

We need to affirm that people have agency and that it is possible for schools to work in socially transformative ways to reduce inequalities and educational disadvantage.

(McInerney, 2004, p. 70)

### Introduction

Social justice is an elusive and contentious concept (Connell, 1997; Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2003, 2004, 2006; Starr, 1991). According to Starr (1991, p. 20), "'Social justice' is one of the most under-defined, under-theorized and capricious concepts around," and will depend on ideological and political affiliations. Each political position will have its own unique conception of what social justice means and looks like in practice. Conservatives, for instance, may equate social justice with *equal opportunity*, liberals with *equal opportunity and inclusivity*, and socialists with *equal power* (Starr, 1991). Even within these categories there are further distinctions and preferences (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; Starr, 1991). Therefore, coming to a universal definition of social justice is not only unlikely but possibly short-sighted given the diversity of cultures, contexts, and perspectives that exist locally and globally. Rather, it may be more useful to think of social justice as an incomplete (local) project—a *process* that ebbs and flows depending on social, cultural, political, and personal contexts and agendas (McInerney, 2003, 2004, 2006). No definition will be natural, neutral, innocent, or final. All definitions will be socially constructed, deeply ideological (Fenna, 1998), and theoretically and practically incomplete (McInerney, 2004). As Starr (1991, p. 24) suggests: "Social justice is always controversial in theory and imperfect in practice."

How social justice is understood and enacted in our school will depend on broader historical perspectives, present-day political and economic agendas, the roles of teachers and students, and school and classroom practices. We want to create a better school for our students. We invite you to help create a better school with us.

Australia only spends 5.8% of GDP on education (18<sup>th</sup> in the OECD). Public investment in universities has fallen by 7% in the last decade while other OECD countries have increased funding by 48% (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 20).



'What about egalitarianism? Given our increasingly stark socio-economic stratification, it's even doubtful whether this is still our dream, and the more we recite it like a mantra, the less clearly we'll perceive the contradictory reality of unequal access to education, health care, housing and information' (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 157).

"Do we really want to raise our kids to be little materialists? Are we setting the right example?" (Mackay, 2007, p. 86).

### Contemporary Context

McInerney (2004, p. 9) notes that "schools are not hermetically sealed from the rest of society" and that if "a community is haemorrhaging because of economic restructuring and unemployment [as our community is], then the ensuing social despair will penetrate all facets of the community, including neighbourhood schools." Australian schools are being affected by changes occurring to Australian society through *globalisation*, *neo-liberalism*, and *economic rationalism* (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2004). These forces are changing how governments are interpreting and enacting social justice in schools (and society), and therefore impacting directly upon the life chances of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Class, race, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of social and cultural exclusion and oppression are vanishing from social discourses on disadvantage and being reframed using deficit discourses which locate failings in individuals rather than social and economic systems (McInerney, 2003, 2004, 2006; Thomson, 2002). One myth needs to be dispelled: *Australian society is not an egalitarian society*.

### Globalisation

Globalisation has seen the growth of a powerful world economy and the collapse of time and space between people and countries (McInerney, 2004, p. 15). Information technologies have swept in a new age of competitive economic activity. Under government pressure, schools have been forced to keep up. Skills, competencies, and vocational training have become the *real* business of Australian schools, leaving programs dedicated to social justice on the humanitarian scrapheap (McInerney, 2004, p. 16; Symes & Preston, 1992). These trends began with the Hawke and Keating governments in the 1980s and were expanded and accelerated in the 1990s by successive Coalition governments (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992).

### Neo-liberalism & Economic Rationalism

Neo-liberal governments have gained ascendancy in most western countries since the collapse of Keynesian economics and the welfare state in the late twentieth-century (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992). The current 2006 Coalition government is a neo-liberal government.

It views economic rationalism as the only viable alternative to the welfare state. Smaller governments, spending cuts, efficiency, and individual 'choice' characterise the new rationalist democracy (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2004). In Australia, growing *under*-employment through the casualisation of the workforce, youth unemployment, cuts in welfare, user-pays principles, and an erosion of unions and collective bargaining have resulted in greater economic inequalities, including two million Australians living in poverty (McInerney, 2004, pp. 19-21).

According to Harvey (2005), neo-liberalism is about the 'restoration' of class power to the ruling elite, a phenomenon associated with 'Empire' and the push of right-wing governments to control people and economies.

### Devolution

State authorities have *devolved* educational responsibilities, but not power, to school councils (Meadmore, 2001, p. 118). As self-managing businesses, schools now compete with other schools for clients and resources (McInerney, 2004, p. 23). Through national standards, state-wide testing, teacher appraisal, and funding provisions based on blackmail and conformity, schools have been made *more* accountable (McInerney, 2004, p. 23; Meadmore, 2001). By replacing the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) with literacy and numeracy programs, the government has effectively located *all* social inequalities in skills rather than social arrangements (McInerney, 2004; Meadmore, 2001; Thomson, 2002). Sadly, we have been thrown into this corporate market-place and penalised for being poorer than other schools. We have been repeatedly 'blamed' for not reaching national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy even though 60% of our students are bilingual and, on the whole, more literate and numerate than previous cohorts.

### Schools & Markets

Public schools (like public hospitals) are fast becoming the 'residual system for the poor' (McInerney, 2004, p. 22). With funding responsibilities left to parents and school councils, fees, fund raising, and corporate sponsorship have increased the disparity between rich and poor schools (McInerney, 2004, p. 22; Meadmore, 2001). Using market logic, education is a *commodity*, students are *clients*, parents are *consumers*, schools and teachers are *providers*, and principals are *managers*.

'The ... yearning for certainty led to the rise of the so-called economic rationalists who preach the gospel of untrammelled free markets. Again, the appeal lies in its magical simplicity. There's only one rule: *let the market decide*' (Mackay, 2007, pp. 275-276).

'Lyndsay Connors says the national system of funding schools is helping entrench social disadvantage in rural and suburban Australia, and that a funding system originally devised to favour disadvantaged Catholic schools was now advantaging the richest private schools. / The government argues that its generous support for private schools is all about promoting freedom of choice, but it's an increasingly lopsided choice...' (Mackay, 2007, p. 323).



(McInerney, 2004, p. 24; McWilliam, 2000; Meadmore, 2001). Parental 'choice' is framed as a liberating concept even though real choice resides with those who can afford to 'shop around' (McInerney, 2004, p. 25).

The implications of *globalisation*, *neo-liberalism*, and *economic rationalism* cannot be underestimated. As Sharp (1998, p. 253) suggests: "Together these pressures create a dog-eat-dog world, a war of all against all." Schools, far from being great social levellers, are becoming sites of increased inequality, curriculum cutbacks, instrumental views of schooling, and job-skilling and credentialing (McInerney, 2004, p. 24; Meadmore, 2001, p. 124). Social justice has been lost to rationalist discourses and market outcomes (McInerney, 2004, p. 25). Hegemonic curricula are perpetuating inequalities and disadvantage while devaluing and ignoring minority perspectives (p. 25). Teachers' work is being construed in instrumental ways which hamper reform initiatives, while increased surveillance, accountability, and an intensification of teachers' work is creating a demanding and repressive workplace (McInerney, 2004; Meadmore, 2001). The end result is that our school is struggling to raise the money necessary to offer a dynamic and heterogeneous curriculum relevant to the needs of our students.

#### Contemporary Inequalities

According to McInerney (2006, pp. 4-6), schools and governments need to recommit to social justice. He argues, firstly, that despite the expansion of education in recent decades educational outcomes have *not* improved for working-class students, many ethnic minorities, or Indigenous Australians. Secondly, the gap between rich and poor in Australia is widening. Thirdly, racism, sexism, and other forms of cultural oppression still persist despite government rhetorics about multiculturalism. In fact, these rhetorics are being further adjusted in the wake of September 11 to narrow the definition of what it means to be Australian. Fourthly, Coalition governments have reversed the process of reconciliation started in the 1990s, and Indigenous Australians continue to be disadvantaged, marginalised, and oppressed by schools and society. Lastly, with policy changes and economic restructuring, new disaffected groups and social agendas are emerging, including the rights of asylum seekers and Islamic groups. We, as a school community, are one of the groups being hurt by economic changes, and many of us are also enduring broader social and systemic discrimination and oppression. Now, more than ever, we need to make social justice a major school issue (McInerney, 2003, 2004, 2006).

'The 'fair go'? That certainly sounds like us. Dinky-di. Unless you're an asylum-seeker, of course, or the kind of refugee we don't want, an Aborigine, poor, homeless, or have a mental illness or some other disability. (Come to think of it, we're quite adept at marginalising people.)' (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 158).

'If you had to be brutally honest about the values that drive [Australians] at present, materialism would have to top the list, perhaps followed by pragmatism' (Mackay, 2007, p. 158).

#### Origins of Mass Schooling

Going to school is a normative concept (Kyle, 1999; Symes & Preston, 1992). In the nineteenth-century few Australian children attended school; most worked and were socialised by parents. With industrialisation came new ideas on the role of the nation state, including calls for *free*, *compulsory*, and *secular* schooling to service industry, the economy, social enlightenment, and social cohesion (Kyle, 1999; Meadmore, 2001; Symes & Preston, 1992). By the 1920s formal mass schooling was compulsory. The states established education departments to manage schools, curriculum content, and teaching standards. Today, these departments are increasingly coerced by federal governments through funding arrangements based on blackmail. These departments have the 'choice' to refuse neo-liberal agendas at a price: millions of dollars of Commonwealth funding (McInerney, 2004). This same top-down bullying is also occurring in our school, where we *can* refuse certain tests and audits at a price: *our funding*.

For much of the twentieth century, the mandates of *free*, *compulsory*, and *secular* held firm (Meadmore, 2001). Recently, however, these terms have been redefined to accommodate neo-liberal agendas (pp.113-114). Public schools are no longer free; they charge fees like private schools. This means that certain subjects may be re-labelled as 'non-essential' and sold at a price (p. 120). This excludes many students from participation and certain career paths. It also means that schools can use debt collectors to pursue unpaid fees (p. 120). Similarly, school attendance was once compulsory from age 5 to 15. Today, governments are forcing students to stay at school by not offering unemployment benefits until the age of 18; instead, 16 and 17 year-olds can receive a youth allowance if they stay at school (p. 122). Many students attend school simply to collect this benefit. Secular schooling, too, was originally conceived to give students a 'balanced' view of society and to avoid monocultural or dogmatic views (p. 122). With the proliferation of private schools in recent years, monocultural schools have multiplied. This is fracturing social cohesion (pp. 122-123).

Broken Bridges High remains committed to free schooling and multicultural and secular world views. We are currently planning extracurricular subjects at no cost to students or parents. For those students forced to attend school, we are looking at student-initiated and interest-based programs to link students to community groups. Essentially, we want students to help develop programs relevant and meaningful to them, rather than have the school perform the task of surveillance and detention.

'Whatever happened to the idea that a world-class public education system – free, universal, compulsory – was the brightest symbol of Australia's commitment to egalitarianism? The egalitarianism ideal was never about equality of outcome, but it was certainly about equality of opportunity and the current school funding arrangements look like a threat to that ideal. In education, equal opportunity doesn't simply mean 'everyone can go to school'; it means there's a uniformly high standard of teaching and resources available to all school pupils – public and private' (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 325).



Across the board, we want teachers, students, and parents to help create a heterogenous and counter-hegemonic curriculum that firstly reflects the needs, aspirations, and values of *our* community, but also challenges dominant hegemonic perspectives that perpetuate a status quo that we have argued is unjust, unfair, and discriminatory (Connell, 1997; McInerney, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992).

### Teachers' & Students' Work

How we think about the work of teachers and students will have a huge bearing on how we think about social justice, pedagogy, curriculum, and overall school management.

### Teacher Constructions

According to Moore (2004), there are three dominant discourses surrounding teacher identity: (1) *the competent craftsman* (who is compliant, hardworking, and favoured by central authorities); (2) *the reflective practitioner* (who scrutinises practice and performance); and (3) *the charismatic subject* (who is largely mythological). Each of these teacher constructions will translate into different practices and outlooks. The first persona sees the teacher as an instrument, technician, and curriculum implementer (McInerney, 2004; McWilliam, 2000; Moore, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992). The second sees the teacher as an active, self-aware, and socially-sensitive professional who critiques practice in search of improvements and oversights (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Dart et al., 1998; Moore, 2004). This type of teacher is more than simply a conduit for centrally mandated curricula, as they tend to question all facets of their work, including issues surrounding social justice. The charismatic subject is largely oblivious to the theories and practices of teaching and unlikely to work for collective solutions to educational disadvantage (Moore, 2004).

More radical conceptions of teachers include *the pragmatic radical* (Boomer, 1988, 1989; Thomson, 1992) and *the activist professional* (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2001). These professionals are realistic about what can and cannot be achieved in different educational contexts. They resist political discourses that reduce teachers to *functionaries* (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2001), *technicians* (D. Hill, personal communication, June 6, 2006), *craftspeople* (Moore, 2004), *corporate leader-managers* (McWilliam, 2000), or *curriculum implementers*

and *instruments* (McInerney, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992). Their moral and professional duty is to fight for social justice and educational reform.

To further complicate the above distinctions, 'teaching' itself can be framed as either a *profession*, as *work*, or as a *gendered occupation*. Each of these perspectives will influence the work, identities, and types of social justice available to teachers (K. Whitehead, personal communication, August 10, 2006). Neo-liberal governments view teachers as workers, rather than activist professionals, and gender distinctions are tacitly if not overtly supported by patriarchal systems that tend to promote men to positions of power over women. Gender equity is therefore an important school reform since the gender discourses we make available to staff and students will directly influence the gender practices promoted in the school (McCann, 2002).

We view teachers at Broken Bridges High as professionals and agents of change. Their work has moral, ethical, emotional, and intellectual components (Cochran-Smith, 1991; McInerney, 2004). This will involve mixing aspects of the 'reflective practitioner' and 'radical' discourses in *collaborative resonance* with other members of the school community (Cochran-Smith, 1991). It will also involve 'creatively appropriating' policy directives and 'reframing' funding requests under the rubric of literacy and numeracy even if our chief aim is to implement social justice (McInerney, 2004). In all, we need to challenge taken-for-granted views about what social justice means in a modern, neo-liberal, capitalist society.

### Student Constructions

The concept of the 'student' is also a social construction (McCann, 2002, p. 56). Whether we think of students as children, youths, adolescents, or young adults will determine how we treat them. Much of this links back to whether students are considered blank slates and empty vessels or active construers of their own worlds and learning (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; Symes & Preston, 1992). If children are viewed as passive, deficient, and powerless, then 'pedagogies of poverty' and rote-learning will be considered legitimate school practices (Haberman, 1991). However, if students are viewed as people now – rather than people-in-waiting – then reciprocal, dialogical, and critical pedagogies will be preferred (Boomer, 1988; Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; McInerney, 2004; Symes & Preston, 1992).



MacMullin (personal communication, August 17, 2006) argues that there are three common representations of childhood in circulation: (1) *the child as victim* (i.e. as weak, vulnerable, passive, dependent, deficient, and needing rescuing or fixing); (2) *the child as future* (i.e. as future workers and people-in-waiting); and (3) *the child as social actor* (i.e. with rights, agency, and the capacity to act now). Whilst we advocate position 3 and the government favours position 2, all three discourses have their place. For instance, an eclectic approach may identify some situations where children need help and protection (e.g. from neo-liberal bullying); others where students imagine preferred futures and long-term career paths (e.g. as active participants rather than human instruments); and others again where students critically engage with the world today (e.g. to change their worlds).

How we understand the terms 'youth' and 'adolescence' will also impact on how we treat students. Brannock (2000) suggests that there are five main discourses used to describe 'wayward' adolescents. For instance, students are described as (1) *troubled*, (2) *deficient*, (3) *rebellious*, (4) *perverted*, or (5) *deviant or diseased*. Clearly, if we subscribe to these discourses *uncritically* we run the risk of blaming students rather than school or social systems for all our problems. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2001, p. 63) remind us that most young people make the transition from childhood to adulthood without succumbing to 'doom' and 'gloom', and that most are happy, well adjusted, and far from evil or crazy. Deficit discourses like those outlined above need to be used sparingly (if at all), particularly if we take the position (which we recommend) that students should be given *greater* responsibility and *greater* input into their schooling lives (Boomer, 1988, 1989). Therefore, we plan to work *with* students, not against them (Wachtel & McCold, 2004).

Constructions of childhood and adolescence are neither innocent nor natural. In fact, each position will have different effects on the capabilities, outlooks, dispositions, and life chances of those being classified. One teacher we spoke to suggested that we treat students as: "*people first, individuals second, and students third,*" even though most schools actually reverse this order (S. Shambrook, personal communication, 2005). This framework could be applied to all members of the school community.





## Taking a Whole-School Approach to Social Justice

### Ideological Conceptions

In this paper we have taken a position. We have framed our critique of historical and contemporary schooling from a critical or 'conflict' perspective. This is a left-wing perspective. We have argued that mindless adherence to rationalist discourses (a right-wing perspective) is hurting our school and our students. There is a long tradition of ideological debate about how schools (and society) should operate, and who or what these institutions should value and accomplish. Broadly speaking, these ideological positions fall under the headings of conservatism, neo-liberalism, liberalism, reform liberalism, social democracy, socialism, Marxism, and conflict theorists, and each of these will view social justice differently (Fenna, 1998; Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; McInerney, 2004; Starr, 1991). Basically, conservatives can be aligned with *autocratic* justice, neo-liberals with *market* justice, liberals with *individual* justice, social democrats with *social* justice, and Marxists and conflict theorists with *collective* justice (Fenna, 1998). It should be remembered, however, that within each of these categories there are agreements and disagreements about what social justice *is* and what schools should do for society.

If we take a conservative or neo-liberal stand we may see our role as simply reproducing existing social arrangements (including inequalities) under an authoritarian management structure (Starr, 1991). If we take a liberal stand we may equate social justice with 'equal opportunity' and provide each student with equal access to the curriculum and equal access to compete for the spoils of education (Starr, 1991). If we take a reform liberal or social democratic position we may view 'inclusivity' as importantly as equal opportunity, and show some interest in equality of outcomes (Haralambos & Holborn, 1996). If, however, we adopt a socialist, Marxist, or conflict perspective, we may restructure the school so that collective justice is valued over individual liberty (Haralambos & Holborn, 1996; Starr, 1991). This way, all students would receive equal access to tuition and resources *and* equal power and say within the collective management structure.

The Curriculum Committee favours an eclectic blend of social democratic, socialist, Marxist, and conflict perspectives, for the simple fact that most of our students are **not** entering school on an equal footing with students in adjacent suburbs. We therefore see it as our duty to think about justice in both *distributional* and *relational*

terms (Gewirtz, 1998). The alternative is to perpetuate an individualist, merit-based, competitive, rat-race where some students win while the majority lose. We think we can do better than this.

Although ideological conceptions of social justice can be confusing, the Curriculum Committee acknowledges that we live in a liberal-democratic capitalist society, and that we cannot wholeheartedly embrace a Marxist approach to education when the rest of society is scrambling to keep up with market capitalism. However, we do believe in chipping away at the difficulties we face as a school community using an eclectic and sometimes contradictory range of strategies (McInerney, 2004). We will no doubt make mistakes. We may even be forced to do things we disagree with in order to receive funding. But this should not deter us from our goal: *to create a fairer school for our students*. A hybrid approach would focus on *economic* factors (i.e. the distribution of goods and services) and *personal* and *social* factors (i.e. the way relationships and institutional practices reify privilege and power) (Gewirtz, 1998; McInerney, 2004).

## School & Classroom Approaches to Social Justice

### Whole-School Initiatives

Connell (1997) and McInerney (2003, 2004, 2006) advocate whole-school approaches to social justice. For Connell (1997), social justice is associated with 'curricula justice' and can only be achieved if *all* stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, and school staff) contribute to curriculum planning. To avoid dominant groups hijacking this process, the curriculum should be counter-hegemonic, heterogeneous, and based on the standpoints of the *least advantaged*. This way, all groups are represented and multiple perspectives are acknowledged. According to McInerney (2003, p. 251), we need to respond to the "classed nature of society and the inequalities arising from the political economy" while also acknowledging the "claims to recognition of groups excluded or marginalised through various forms of cultural oppression." A *language of possibility* is established that not only targets educational inequalities but also challenges hegemonic power (pp. 253-254). This way, policy directives are appropriated, resisted, and modified at the local level to counteract the worst excesses of neo-liberalism (p. 253). Despite appearances, hegemony is never complete (Boomer, 1988; Freire, 1996; McInerney, 2004) and grassroots resistance can make a difference (Symes & Preston, 1992, p. 52).



At Wattle Plains, for instance, such approaches have been used to combat social injustice (see McInerney, 2003, 2004). By sharing power and establishing democratic relationships, Wattle Plains has developed culturally diverse and counter-hegemonic curricula (McInerney, 2003, p. 255). Student voice, critical literacies, multicultural perspectives, affective learning, and explicit teaching are combined to create a rich and robust approach to curriculum justice (pp. 255-256). Like Wattle Plains, we need to "articulate a socially just and democratic alternative to market-driven, utilitarian approaches to public schooling" (McInerney, 2003, p. 259).

#### Pedagogies of Possibility

We believe a socially just school should embrace certain ideological and pedagogical themes. These include: **social justice**, as an explicit school priority; **emancipatory praxis**, where action and reflection are used to expose oppression and generate reformative action (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; McInerney, 2004; O'Farrell, 1999); **critical literacies**, to challenge discourses and practices that normalise and legitimise social inequality (Knobel & Honan, 1998); **collective and democratic decision making**, where ideas, practices, and discourses are shared and understood by all who participate (McInerney, 2004); **negotiated curricula**, where students, teachers, and other members of the school community create curriculum content relevant and meaningful to local needs and experiences (Boomer, 1988; Connell, 1997; Freire, 1996; McInerney, 2004; O'Farrell, 1999); **socially critical perspectives**, where all facets of social experience are open to scrutiny and review (Kemmis, Cole, & Suggett, 1994); and **critical and transformative pedagogies**, where dominant discourses are challenged and alternative perspectives are construed (Freire, 1996; McInerney, 2004). As McInerney (2004, p. 10) suggests:

Fundamentally, a commitment to social justice is about teachers and students exploring the possibilities of creating a more just world through a curriculum which promotes an understanding of the causes of human oppression; educates children about human rights, the plight of refugees, global poverty and the environment; models democratic practices; and encourages action in support of the oppressed in the local, national and global community.

Here, students learn more than facts, figures, and rules. They learn how to be socially active and responsible members of local and global communities (O'Farrell, 1999; Wang, 2002).

#### Social Literacy Project

The Social Literacy Project (SLP) endeavours to generate what Sharp (1998, p. 255) calls *really useful knowledge* and emancipatory thinking. The SLP helps learners confront the *constructed* nature of 'individualism' by uncovering the concepts that lie behind and beneath the cultural mirages and liberal rhetorics. Sharp suggests that concepts like *class*, *ethnicity*, *gender*, *stratification*, and *status groups* need to be made explicit so that students can begin to question the historical and contemporary fictions that dominate their lives. This way, a counter-discourse is constructed that challenges the 'credibility' of market logic and neo-liberal rhetoric. According to Sharp (1998), hegemonic curricula (and mainstream social discourses) deliberately 'omit' and 'obscure' the realities and vested interests of capitalist culture while trumpeting the virtues of individualism and dog-eat-dog economics. The global spin is so powerful and far-reaching that the fictions seem *natural* and *normal* (Sharp, 1998). It is our responsibility to de-naturalise and demythologise these fictions (McInerney, 2004, p. 64). After all, concepts like capitalism, neo-liberalism, economic rationalism, individualism, racism, sexism, and classism, are *not* natural or innocent phenomena. They are socially constructed categories that need to be challenged if social justice is to have any meaning in our world.

#### A Critical Framework

According to McInerney (2004, p. 67), a critical pedagogy will be: (1) **participatory** by involving students in curriculum design; (2) **situated** in the life worlds and language of students; (3) **critical** by encouraging critique and self-reflection; (4) **democratic** through mutual construction; (5) **dialogic** by promoting dialogues between students and teachers; (6) **de-socialising** by breaking down the silences of classrooms; (7) **multicultural** by recognising the gendered, racialised, and classed experiences of students; (8) **research-oriented** through social and academic rigour; (9) **activist** by promoting change; and (10) **affective** by developing feelings as well as social inquiry.



Being critical is more than simply opposing the world. It is about opening up the world and exposing its secrets. It is about examining everyday practices, relationships, and discourses, and imagining alternative ways of living and dreaming. It is about overcoming the limitations of the present to create possible futures. As Giroux (1981) suggests: "Critical pedagogy is designed to give students the tools to examine how society has functioned to shape and constrain their aspirations and goals, and prevent them from even dreaming about life outside the one they presently know" (as cited in Knobel & Honan, 1998, p. 127). It is our view that curricula that ignore critical perspectives are not only committed to injustice, *but to hurting people*. Such curricula leave blood on the hands of those who support them (Finley, 2005).

#### The Broken Bridges Approach

Our research has uncovered a range of ideas and practices that we think will help create a productive and vibrant school community. There is no point espousing social justice and emancipatory pedagogies if such ideas are abandoned at the first sign of government pressure or school disunity. We need to see ourselves – not as disempowered functionaries – but as active agents of social change.

All of these pedagogies attempt to guide learners into deeper levels of personal and social awareness. By peeling away the myths and taken-for-granted ideologies of contemporary capitalist life, learners discover new ways of 'reading' the world. They develop a sense of optimism about being able to engage with and alter the world as they find it. Learners also begin to see how they are made complicit in the very systems and structures that perpetuate social inequalities and oppressive social relations, and in so doing become aware of the hidden injuries faced by others. Such pedagogies have the potential to awaken people to the secret knowledges and invidious forces that coerce us all into thinking and acting in certain ways. This way, rather than mass-producing docile and obedient workers, we can help students develop the necessary perspectives to fashion their own responses to the powers-that-be and dog-eat-dog economics (O'Farrell, 1999).

Such initiatives will not be easy. But with some very real and practical pedagogies at hand, teachers (and parents) should feel better equipped to provide students with a brand of 'hope' that is indeed practical and within reach (McInerney, 2004).



#### Conclusion

Social justice is a slippery concept. No definition is natural, neutral, innocent, or final. Each position is socially situated and socially constructed to serve different purposes and different people. We, too, have constructed a version of social justice to serve the needs and interests of our community.

We live at a time in history when political concern for social justice is waning. Instead, neo-liberalism, economic rationalism, and globalisation are coming to dominate political and social thinking. Our society is at war – an economic war, characterised by individualism, instrumentalism, and competition – a war of *all against all*. Cooperative practices need to replace individualist rhetorics. Whole-school approaches based on democratic relationships and critical perspectives can offset the worst brutalities and oversights of managerialist approaches to public schooling. Through collaboration we can establish a *heartful* school ethos committed to social justice and community wellbeing. Such a standpoint recognises the needs and



interests of disadvantaged groups and imagines teachers and students in socially active roles.

From this perspective, social justice is more than a cold, detached, procedural, distributive, bureaucratic, and disinterested justice. Rather, it is a genuine, caring, substantive, relational, and compassionate justice, where the social, cultural, and political mechanisms that produce and reify social injustices are critically and actively challenged for the benefit of *all* people, not just the ruling elite (Connell, 1997; Gewirtz, 1998; McInerney, 2003, 2004, 2006; Starr, 1991; Yates & McLeod, 2000). This kind of justice involves heart and soul, for it does not equate justice with any social or political arrangement that sacrifices the *many* for the sake of the *few* (Starr, 1991). Instead, it understands social justice as an ongoing social commitment that meets the needs and interests of all people, regardless of the heartless dictates of the market.

*Now it's over to you. We need your help to put social justice back on the school map.*

"When we embrace materialism and enshrine it as our core value – as Australia is in danger of doing – we not only let 'the economy' obscure our view of society, but we nurture the crazy idea that our wealth defines our worth. (If that's true, more is bound to be better, so get back on the treadmill right now)" (Mackay, *Advance Australia Where*, 2007, p. 342).

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William to Adso: "The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw a ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless. ... The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away" (Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1980/1998, p. 492).



## Postscript

This text represents the ‘zeitgeist’ (time spirit) of 2007. As such, it ‘meditates’ on issues and concerns relevant to that year and to me at that time. Nonetheless, on finishing this text and contemplating its final arrangement and aesthetic, the Australian political landscape has suddenly changed. On Saturday, November 24, 2007, about one year after I started this text, the Australian people elected Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister in a landslide (or ‘Ruddslide’ as the *Sunday Mail* described it) victory over John Howard and the Coalition Government, thus giving Labor its first Federal election victory in 11 years.

It remains to be seen whether this new government can improve the Australian educational landscape and bring social justice back to the fore. But given my criticisms of John Howard and neo-liberal ideology in this text, I am openly optimistic and looking forward to the rest of my PhD candidature and the years ahead. Long live democracy ‘to-come’ (as Derrida might say)!

## End of the culture wars

Richard Nile | November 28, 2007 | *The Australian*

### THE culture wars are over. The history wars are finished.

Such an assessment should not necessarily impute ideological victory or defeat by any one opinion or side of the argument, though it is made in the wake of the electoral demise of the Howard government.

Under Howard, wedge politics were routinely deployed with ruthless effect and attacks on intellectuals were commonplace.

Independent thinking was targeted as being “un-Australian”.

Yet the culture and history wars died a natural death through a lack of interest and relevance among a new voting public, inspired not by Howard’s term as prime minister, but by the generational turn towards Rudd. ...

Generational change is well and truly underway across our universities and will gather momentum in the next few years. This is the real education revolution. ...

The oldies stuck with Howard and his outgoing team on Saturday, The under 50s voted for Rudd in droves.

The younger demographic took confidence in the economic prosperity of Australia to vote for a compassionate society – which new liberal leadership aspirants are beginning to talk up in the wake of Howard’s end.

The time is now ripe for reinstating respect back into intellectual inquiry and independent thinking. ...

The culture and history wars are over and with them should also go the adversarial nature of intellectual debate. ...