



CHAPTER FOUR

RECOGNITIVE JUSTICE: RENEWED COMMITMENT TO SOCIALLY JUST SCHOOLING

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Abstract

The contribution of schools to the production and maintenance of educational inequalities is no secret, yet the continued support for and promotion of differential educational outcomes on the basis of the social groups to which students belong is clearly unjust. This paper discusses the 'ideal' arrangements to promote success in schooling for all students while also critiquing arrangements that are less-than-ideal. In rethinking these matters, the paper draws on the notion of 'recognitive justice': a process model of social justice that includes a positive regard for social difference and the centrality of socially democratic processes. Issues that emerge for teachers and schools include: fostering self-respect and facilitating students' positive self-identities; promoting the development of students' abilities and encouraging expressions of their experiences; and establishing meaningful involvement in schooling premised on self-determination.

Introduction

The fair distribution of wealth and opportunity amongst individuals and social groups was a concern for many western democracies in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the post-war Keynesian period. Yet, at the close of that century and as a new one begins, fair distributions as a rationale for policy and its implementation

have come under increasing attack. It is not simply that there has been a loss of political will to maintain a viable and vibrant welfare net for those most in need in our society or that the responsibility for providing these needs has shifted from the state to individuals themselves. Certainly, such critique and practice is evident in current marketised versions of social justice (Rizvi & Lingard, 1996) that reduce fairness to reaping the benefits of one's hard work, ingenuity and/or intellectual capacities and which reposition the needy as having obligations to their benefactors or face retribution (Carr & Hartnett, 1996) if these are not met. But it is also from those with in-principle support for more socially-democratic approaches to the just treatment of society's citizens, who have questioned the outcomes of such redistributive treatment.

In short, groups targeted as potential recipients of social and material goods have appeared over time to be little better off. This is not to suggest that there have been no gains for marginalised individuals and groups. Women, for example, are now better represented in some of the more elite enclaves of our society, even though there is still some distance to travel in this respect. Still, it remains that the gap between the haves and the have-nots has not been greatly redressed and, many argue, it is a gap that has increased over the past decade. In particular, poverty in western societies appears to be on the rise as less people have access to work; in part, because of the effects of credentialism and the introduction of new technologies but also because of the globalisation of labour markets and the associated increased competition for work. There are also greater numbers and kinds of workers whose positions have been casualised: their official hours reduced and their job security now more tenuous. Others, including some leaders within marginalised groups, argue that welfare has also worked to locate and maintain people in their dependency on state and philanthropic distributions.

However, unlike those who defer to the virtues of the market, we do not regard these as arguments to dispense with distributive justice. Rather, we argue that what is signalled is a need to address in more concerted ways the processes involved in the production of inequalities and injustices within social institutions such as schools.

This paper takes such concern as its starting point; a positioning often referred to in the academic literature as involving a politics of recognition (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1995) — of differences and commonalities — and which requires rethinking what is meant by social justice, including an acknowledgment of social group interrelations. Justice in these terms harbours a positive regard for social difference and the centrality of socially democratic processes in working towards its achievement. We refer to such dispositions as ‘recognitive justice’, defined in terms of three interrelated conditions:

(1) fostering respect for different social groups through their self-identification; (2) opportunities for groups’ self-development and self-expression; and (3) the participation of groups in making decisions that directly effect them, through their representation on determining bodies (Gale, 2000, p. 260).

These frame the remainder of the paper and its review of recent social justice literature, particularly as this relates to schooling. Indeed, this is the paper’s central purpose: to explore what recognitive justice means for teachers, schools and their communities committed to socially just schooling. Throughout, we address these issues from the epistemological standpoint of students, by asking: Who am I at school? What is worth knowing and doing? and Who decides what is best for me?

Who am I at school?

Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982, pp. 82–93) suggest that there are three typical identities for ‘how kids are attached to school’: defined in terms of compliance,

resistance, and those who adopt a pragmatic 'invisibility' (ie. they appear neither compliant nor resistant). Colloquial representations of these visible extremes include the 'goodie-goodie', the 'teacher's pet', the 'class clown', the 'dunce', and the 'bully'. Also recognisable in the academic literature are more sophisticated accounts of difference that characterise students as 'gifted' and 'talented' or with 'attention deficit disorders' and other 'at risk' classifications. What is worth noting in these student portraits is their reliance on institutionalised forms of expertise embodied in teachers and other specialists. That is, students' identities are those seen from the perspective of schooling and social institutions, not from the perspective of students even though these same students may unwittingly propagate, and even come to accept, such accounts of their difference. In short, identities are frequently *assigned* to students either by individual teachers or schools in keeping with the assessment that 'only the oppressed and excluded groups are defined as different' (Young, 1990, p. 170), thereby threatening the self-worth of many by displacing their view of their own identity.

Still, some criticise teachers and their teaching for their treatment of students as if they are all the same and/or for teaching to the lowest common denominator (to accommodate low ability students) (Balfanz, 2000). The latter in particular is a critique more often levelled by liberals and invariably does not stand up to critical scrutiny. By contrast, the research literature provides considerable evidence that teachers' practices do give recognition to students' differences, although not always in ways that might be expected or desired. For instance, males and females continue to experience differential treatment in schools (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). To be a girl at school often means to be quieter, more passive and attentive than boys (Kenway & Willis, 1990), or at least this is the implicit expectation. Similarly, racial minorities are more highly represented amongst those

who achieve low standardised test results and/or drop out of school, and amongst those who are placed in special education and/or vocational programs (Stewart, 1997). Poverty, too, remains a strong predictor of academic success (Connell, 1993; Apple, 1996).

This is not the kind of recognition of difference intended by recognitive justice. Instead, what is at issue is the value placed on these differences, by students themselves and by others (including teachers). One revaluing of difference, in response to students' deficits and disadvantages outlined above, can be seen in its individualisation: the proposition that all students are unique — this being the one thing they share — hence, the reasoning that students need to be treated equally as individuals, irrespective of their cultural contexts. Indeed, some teachers who take this view are wary of acknowledging group differences associated with their students' colour, gender and/or poverty, for example, for fear of reproducing stereotypes and restricting students' individuality¹. A second reconstituted account of difference places emphasis on group diversity. This is the view that students' differences are related to the traditions and norms of the cultural groups to which they belong. Moreover, such traditions and norms are seen as intrinsically positive and, hence, beyond question. In this account, the role of teachers and others is to affirm students in their difference. But what is not clear in both of these forms of recognition is how the celebration of individual or group difference and rejection of criticism contributes to differences in the circumstances of marginalised groups. As McLaren (1997) and Fraser (1997) argue, recognising and respecting diversity in itself does not redress adverse academic achievements for marginalised students.

To rethink our way through matters of student differences simply by acknowledging them is to miss the paternalism often embedded in teacher-student relations; relations regarded by some as central to education (Moran, 1999). Active

trust and mutual respect are required at these individual and collective levels. Feelings of 'positive self-regard, high self-esteem, optimism, motivation to perform well and an internal locus of control' (McIntyre, White & Yoast, 1990, p. 24) flow from acknowledgment and appreciation of difference and respect for all students in schooling. There is also a need for 'equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups, who mutually respect one another and affirm one another in their difference' (Young, 1990, p. 163). At the very least, a positive sense of group difference has been linked to improvement in the academic outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

If it is to address the above shortcomings, recognitive justice must begin from the standpoint of the least advantaged (Connell, 1993). Making decisions for the good of marginalised students is not what is intended. Rather, people themselves need to be involved in naming what is valuable about their identities and even what these identities are. Yet, as imagined here, self-identification is neither exclusionary nor self-indulgent. Within recognitive justice, 'self' is dialectically understood with singular and plural dimensions. That is, individuals do not act in isolation — as in market conceptions of self-interest — but in relationship; hence Bourdieu and Wacquant's reference to them as social agents, 'the bearers of capitals' (1992, p. 108). Self-identification and respect are the hallmarks of recognitive justice. As a first step they require teachers to create real opportunities to get to know their students and for their students to get to know them and themselves, including whom they are and what they believe.

What is worth knowing and doing at school?

A second and related condition of recognitive justice concerns what is worth knowing and doing at school, informed by commitments to self-expression and

development. A major implication of these conditions and commitments relates to the formation of transparent links between the classroom and the world beyond it, so that all students see their everyday lives and experiences as relevant to their learning and success at school. In this context, it is the role of teachers and schools to encourage and assist students to draw on their cultural experiences in order to succeed academically. Yet, despite repeated calls for teachers to be aware of and build upon the literacies their students bring to classrooms (Heath, 1983; Cairney & Ruge, 1998), teachers continue to give priority to the stories of the lives enjoyed by 'well-off, highly educated and socially conforming groups' (Hattam, Shacklock & Smyth, 1998, p. 102). That is, schools 'connect best with, and work best for, students of middle class, Anglo, male backgrounds' (Ladwig & Gore, 1998, p. 19).

So often we see the values, experiences and perspectives of privileged groups parading as universal in schools. Also known as cultural imperialism (Young, 1990), this type of oppression renders the perspectives of non-dominant groups as invisible and blocks their opportunities to exercise their capacities in socially recognised ways (Young, 1990). Instead, we need to 'offer a vision of a heterogeneous public that acknowledges and affirms group differences' (Young, 1990, p. 10). As Edwards and Young suggest, 'until schools acknowledge the range in dispositions, backgrounds, experiences, and strengths among families, efforts to establish sound home/school communication and partnerships will continue to falter' (1992, p. 74). These are partnerships that are essential for ensuring relevance of what is learned within the classroom to the world beyond.

In positioning some kinds of knowledge as more valuable than other kinds, 'what meanings are considered the most important, what experiences are deemed the most legitimate, and what forms of writing and reading matter are largely determined by those groups who control the economic and

cultural apparatuses of a given society' (Giroux, 1990, p. 85). The curriculum should be an open space for exploring the world in which we live, yet the competitive academic curriculum (Connell, 1994) defines the dominant view of what learning ought to be and dislocates other ways of organising knowledge (Connell, 1993). While certain knowledge is selected and legitimated as *the* school curriculum, other knowledge is ignored, displaced and/or marginalised. Rather than school being an important place for gaining new understandings of culture in a democratic society, an elitist and narrow notion of what counts is supported by this assimilationist paradigm (Hattam, Shacklock & Smyth, 1998). Schools exclude multiple voices and experiences within classrooms and in so doing, devalue students' inherited linguistic and cultural competencies (cultural capital) (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

It is clear that not all cultural capital is equal in status: some groups and their particular dispositions are 'socially dominant — carry[ing] with them social power and access to economic success' (Delpit, 1992, p. 297); whereas the cultural capital of others' homes and communities is significantly different to that which is valued by schooling. For these students, 'educational knowledge is uncommonsense knowledge' (Bernstein, 1971, p. 58), removed from their everyday experiences and understandings. When the cultural divide between home and school is significant and little is done to recognise and ratify home practices (Lawson, 2000), students are prevented from seeing their own experiences of life and family as relevant to their learning at school. Responding to this alienation, students often reject the legitimacy of schools as institutions of dominant groups (Brint, 1998). Excluded rather than respected for their difference, many develop an identity of themselves as outcasts, displaying a pattern of low commitment to schooling and behaviour that is not at all

irrational in an environment that is viewed as 'uncaring, culturally incompetent, antagonistic, and oppressive' (Franklin, 2000, p. 12). It is hardly surprising that so many of these students choose to leave school, perceiving it as irrelevant to their needs and interests (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000) and feeling as though they are not valued by the world.

To avoid such outcomes, schools need to create environments that value and appreciate cultural differences and recognise education as a process that takes place both within formal institutions as well as within families and communities (Cox, 2000). Mechanisms need to be established for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of all groups but particularly the oppressed and disadvantaged (Ladwig & Gore, 1998). Similarly, success at school 'needs to be redefined to incorporate the lives and experiences of currently marginalised and materially excluded groups' (Hattam, Shacklock & Smyth, 1998, p. 102). One way to do this is for schools to embrace the notion of multiple knowledges that are equally valid and embark on a strategy of *inverting hegemony* (Connell, 1993). This strategy seeks to reconstruct the mainstream hegemonic curriculum by incorporating content and pedagogy in ways that build on the interests and perspectives of the least advantaged in a program of common learning in schools. Even so, it is also important to acknowledge the changing value of cultural capital from one context to another and to equip students with the cultural capital valued by dominant groups in order that they might succeed in today's society. The point is not to eliminate the cultural capital that students bring with them to school or use it to limit their potential, but rather to add other cultural capital to their repertoires (Delpit, 1992).

However, if teachers have little understanding of the knowledges their students bring with them to school, it is very difficult for these to be valued and built on. In this

context, establishing and maintaining positive home-school relationships feature as particularly important in disadvantaged communities and enable teachers to learn about them. Such partnerships have also been found to be instrumental in enhancing educational outcomes for children from marginalised communities (see Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995; Cairney & Munsie, 1995) by promoting the alignment of goals and expectations and the development of mutually supportive practices in the home and school (Lawson, 2000).

Who decides what is best for me?

While students' self-development and self-expression require their participation in the educational process, it is important for teachers committed to recognitive justice to consider how such participation is determined and whether these participatory processes are democratic. Decision making processes need to address domination, or 'institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions' (Young, 1990, p. 38) by ensuring the meaningful participation of groups — particularly non-dominant groups — directly affected by the decisions made. This involvement in decision-making processes needs to be premised on self-determination. For conditions of self-determination to be fulfilled in schools, all those involved in schooling — students, parents, staff, community members, local businesses and so on — need to feel as though they can contribute to the quality of life in the school. They need to be and feel regarded as equally valuable partners in collaborative decision making processes.

Although schools were once 'fortress-like' institutions with the purposes of education departments being carried out 'by principals and teachers with little negotiation with, and input from, school communities, including parents'

(Lingard, Hayes & Mills, in press, p. 3), the need to respond to local concerns through shared decision making is increasingly recognised. There appears some consensus that 'wherever possible, decisions should be made by those who have access to the best local information, who are responsible for implementing policies, and who have to bear the consequences of the decisions' (Department of Education, 1990, p. 41). This 'social democratic' version of devolution (Rizvi, 1994) experiments with more open and participatory relationships with parents and school communities and devolves forms of decision making to schools.

In the context of schooling, *generative politics*, or seeking 'to allow individuals and groups to *make things happen*, rather than have things happen to them' (Giddens, 1994, p. 15, emphasis added), opens up the processes of schooling to groups who traditionally have been excluded and seriously engages their views in decision-making. Such a collaborative school culture calls for partnerships in which the ideals and interests of all members are valued and their respective concerns, conditions and objectives are compared and contrasted. Rather than being a power struggle between conflicting ideas, this needs to be an open and public forum in which 'different groups can "sit down together", however difficult that may appear at times and however different their voices may sound' (Gale, 2000, p. 266) and negotiate their way forward.

While this process involves bringing together all those affected by schooling and involving them in shaping the direction of the school, it is important to emphasise that democratic processes are not only about who is involved in decision making, but also under what conditions. For conditions of self-determination to be met, the traditional, entrenched orthodoxy of principals as primary decision maker needs to be challenged by extending the leadership role to many individuals and groups in a participatory style

of management (Wheeler & Agruso, 1996). A governance structure supporting decision-making practices in concert with the entire school community assumes more flexible leadership that enables participants to 'exercise the power of their human agency in self-determining ways' (Millwater, Yarrow & Short, 2000, p. 5). The shift and subsequent change in roles and responsibilities affords all members of the school community with opportunity for increased involvement that leads to a sense of ownership of school reform and control over the school agenda.

While it is possible to imagine some consensus on the value of democratic pedagogy and curriculum, teachers and schools more often than not underestimate the potential of students to participate in discussions about what happens in their schools. Consultation with students over issues can be tokenistic or students are left out of the dialogue completely (Edwards, 1999). Students are not ignorant of this. The contradictions, for example, 'of requiring students to sit, by compulsion not choice, in classrooms in which they have little input or control, while we attempt to teach them to think for themselves and to participate in decision-making are clearly evident' (Ladwig & Gore, 1998, p. 18). Moreover, when students do have a voice in forums such as Student Representative Councils, these are often seen as only reflecting the dominant voices within the school. That is, the student voices that are invited and listened to are those voices that reflect the views of the powerful groups in the school and often possess the social and cultural capital valued by them (Edwards, 1999).

Clearly, this is not consistent with conditions of self-determination. Teachers and schools need to allow all voices to be heard and take the ideas and concerns of all students into account. Joint responsibility by teachers and students for decisions and the subsequent sense of control students have over their own learning is important for self-

determination. However, 'democratization *in* the school is not necessarily the same as democratization *of* the school' (Connell, 1993, p. 71). Even when offered decision making roles, involving parents and the wider community in schooling can often be challenging. In disadvantaged schools in particular, forging strong relationships between the school and its surrounding communities can be extremely difficult (Connell, 1993). For instance, it would be wrong to assume that 'working-class parents can simply be inculcated into what is essentially a bourgeois school culture in the relatively easy way in which middle-class parents are able to' (Lucey & Walkerdine, 2000, p. 46).

While concerned about their children, working-class parents often have neither the dominant cultural nor the economic resources to become involved in their children's schooling (Lareau, 1987). They are also more likely to have had negative experiences as students themselves, making community participation in disadvantaged schools via conventional channels difficult (Connell, 1993). At the secondary level, in response to adolescents' growing needs for autonomy (Caissy, 1994), parent involvement in schools tends to decline even further. Nevertheless, effective partnerships between schools and families are seen as instrumental in influencing student achievement and motivation and improving educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities (Lingard, Mills & Hayes, 2000). It is imperative, therefore, that positive relationships with school communities are built. Community representatives must be drawn into the process of educational decision making and allowed a voice. These opportunities to be involved in collaborative decisions that affect schooling and, therefore, the lives of their children, empower families and help all members of a school's community to feel that they are valued by and can contribute to the quality of life in the school.

Teachers, too, need to feel that they are valued. Participation in collaborative decisions that will ultimately affect them not only challenges top-down structures but their endorsement and ownership of decisions fosters feelings of empowerment, which appears to impact on their motivation to act upon and commitment to the outcomes of the decision making process (Whitaker & Moses, 1990). This is the premise of the most recent school reform movement in Queensland, Australia, the New Basics Project (Education Queensland, 2000), which 'seeks to foreground teachers' knowledges, teachers' professional development and the creation of school learning communities as a way to align the three message systems of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Bernstein, 1971) at the school site' (Lingard, Hayes & Mills, in press, p. 4). This response to much educational reform, which has been done to, rather than with teachers, considers the importance of bringing teachers back in to educational restructuring as central to improving student outcomes (Lingard, Hayes & Mills, in press).

The benefits of school based decision making are wide ranging. When decisions are more school relevant, schools are able to provide a more appropriate education for all students. As well as empowering students for learning, this 'devolution of power has the potential to reduce alienation from schools, increase job satisfaction of employees, promote direct participation of all relevant groups, and raise community understanding' (Lingard, Hayes & Mills, in press, p. 18). In fact, 'the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions, and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capabilities and realize their choices' (Young, 1990, p. 173), is seen as an important element and condition of recognitive justice. This clearly expands notions of social justice beyond the distribution of social goods, even though such distributions are important considerations.

People 'ought to decide collectively for themselves the goals and rules that will guide their action' (Young, 1990, p. 91). Structures that do not allow them to participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions 'depoliticize society by ... reducing individuals ... to passive agents of the system ... and deny them the status of responsible actors' (Ferguson, 1984, p. 18) capable of claiming to know what is good for them (Fraser, 1987; Young, 1990). Yet 'the best way for citizens to ensure that their own needs and interests will be voiced and will not be dominated by other interests' (Young, 1990, p. 92) is through democratic participatory processes. How can the interests of the oppressed be protected or advanced when the social position of the privileged — so often the ones in decision making roles — prevents them from understanding those interests and at the same time depends on their continued oppression (Young, 1990)?

Only a conception of justice that acknowledges and affirms rather than represses group differences will challenge institutionalised domination. Specifically, a democratic society needs to provide mechanisms for levels of involvement in decision-making processes premised on self-determination. Procedures in schooling must be established that facilitate the open participation of affected interest groups — and particularly disadvantaged groups — to ensure that their distinct voices and perspectives are publicly heard in decision making that directly affects their lives.

Conclusion

What, then, can we say about recognitive justice from the perspective of students and their parents, particularly those traditionally marginalised by schooling? In brief, it means opportunity: to identify one's own identity and for this to be respected; to express what one knows and can do, and to be involved in the further development of these; and to

participate meaningfully in making decisions that effect one's own life and future. The intent of recognitive justice, then, is to establish the conditions for new conversations (genuine expressions of interest, understanding and aspiration) and for new actions (proactive engagements with local and global constraints and opportunities); their newness deriving as much from who is involved and how, as from a recognition of new times.

More generally, appreciation and respect for all those involved in schooling is the basis for ensuring that relationships between all members of the school community are built on active trust and mutuality. Recognition and affirmation of difference is an important part of this process. Similarly, redefining success at school to include multiple voices and experiences within classrooms and therefore valuing *all* students' inherited linguistic and cultural competencies is also implied. Establishing positive school-community relationships is an essential part of ensuring that this takes place. Finally, procedures must be established to facilitate the opening up of decision-making processes to all affected interest groups. This means that all those involved in schooling, particularly those groups who traditionally have been excluded from such processes, should be encouraged to participate meaningfully in collaborative decision making processes. In this way, students, parents, staff, other community members and local businesses can all contribute to the quality of life in schooling.

Endnotes

1 See Young's (1990, p. 158) rendition of this position.

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