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Towards an understanding of curricular justice and democratic schooling

Abstract

Curricular justice, achieved through a counter-hegemonic curriculum that serves the needs of the least rather than most advantaged members of society (Connell, 1993; 2012), plays a central role in providing more equitable access to meaningful education for all young people. We contend that the defining features of the contemporary schooling context in many parts of the globe, including Australia, are growing inequality and increasing disparity between students who have access to educational opportunities and outcomes, and those who do not. We take Connell's claims—made in *Schools and Social Justice*, published in 1993—of the centrality of social justice in schooling and consider its relevance nearly 30 years later. In particular, we argue that curricular justice must sit at the heart of schooling that fosters democratic participation and meaningful opportunities for civic participation and belonging within society.

> *The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about. (Connell, 1993, p. 15)*

Introduction

In this paper, we argue that enabling schools to contribute to meaningful democratic participation for young people requires careful consideration of the role of curricular justice in education. We contend that this imperative is ever more urgent in the contemporary schooling context in many parts of the globe, including Australia, characterised by growing inequality and increasing disparity between students who have access to educational opportunities and outcomes, and those who do not. We take Connell's (1993) claims of the centrality of social justice in schooling and consider its relevance nearly 30 years later. For Connell, social justice and schools are interlinked because 1) education institutions are major public assets and how the benefits accruing from them are distributed matters; 2) schools shape the kind of society we live in; and 3) the curriculum (including the hidden curriculum) indicates a society's values in terms of what it means to '*educate*' (pgs. 11-15). In this paper, we consider the ways in

which curricular justice fosters democratic participation and provides young people with opportunities to engage in meaningful learning that is connected to their lives.

We write from the Australian context, in which state and federal education ministers agreed on a set of national goals for schooling at the end of 2019. The first goal of the *Mparntwe Declaration* (Education Council, 2019) is that 'the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity' so that all young people can 'live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives' (p. 4). This is a noble goal worthy of an education system in which curricular justice is key. However, it is also well understood that 'broad statements of goals, even when explicitly recognising the values of equity and social justice, are seldom able to address the multiple ways in which schooling itself produces and reproduces inequalities' (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 140). While it is equally well understood that minority groups are educationally disadvantaged, Groundwater-Smith et al. (2009) postulated that 'it is quite another thing to think that schools might actually be implicated in cementing rather than disrupting this disadvantage' (p. 73). Similarly, Connell (1993) argued that schools do not simply mirror societal inequalities but are active agents in the reproduction of societal values, discourses and issues of unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege:

> Education systems are busy institutions. They are vibrantly involved in the production of social hierarchies. They select and exclude their own clients; they expand credentialed labour markets; they produce and disseminate particular kinds of knowledge to particular users. (p. 32)

Young people from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to come to school without the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) in their 'virtual backpacks' (Thomson, 2002) needed to navigate the middle-class milieu of Australian schools. The resulting negative impacts on their sense of belonging (Pendergast et al., 2018) and sense of achievement create an achievement gap that widens during their schooling unless there is sensitive and sustained intervention by schools (Apple & Buras, 2006). In terms of social justice and the post-school trajectory of young people, the answer to addressing this situation does not lie in the provision of a 'dumbed-down' curriculum that focuses only on 'the basics'. Rather, schools need to find ways to facilitate the access of marginalised young people to diverse and rich curriculum opportunities that enable them to become critical, creative and independent thinkers.

'Which students' receive 'what kind of curriculum' often depends upon young people's engagement in learning, which in turn is shaped by socio-economic factors, geolocation, racial,

cultural and ethnic background. This iniquitous situation is further exacerbated by lower retention rates among schooling populations struggling with learning engagement (Allen et al., 2018). According to AUTHOR, the 'political context in Australia is not conducive to retaining and supporting young people with complex material, social and personal needs in mainstream schools' (p. 609). Further, the neoliberal policies of market-based approaches to schooling such as school choice and increased government support for independent schools, the responsibilisation of young people for their educational outcomes, and the increased reliance on standardised assessments, combine to shift the focus away from schools and social justice to one of maximising individual outcomes within an education marketplace (Connell, 2013).

The policy mantra of successive governments over the past two decades in Australia has been one of 'quality'. For example, the Federal Minister for Education, Alan Tudge, recently claimed that poor teacher quality, engendered by university courses that focus on theory rather than practical skills, is negatively affecting students' achievement as determined by standardised test results (Dick, 2021). Within this positioning, equity discourses have been reframed through the removal of the complex interplays of social, economic and educational factors of disadvantage. Instead, the policy gaze has turned to the problem of 'quality teachers' (e.g., Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021), which responsibilises teachers for students' academic outcomes, while ignoring systemic social inequality and issues of access and resourcing for schools serving marginalised communities.

A potted historical summary of the current context

Much has been made of the neoliberal politics that have shaped—and continue to shape—educational debates (e.g., Ball, 2012, 2013). However, we want to acknowledge that schools have long been associated with the reproduction of inequalities and injustices in society, not just as a result of contemporary neoliberal politics. They have been seen to work to embed class injustice (Apple, 1982; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1984), to reinscribe gender inequalities (Elwood, 2016), to maintain white privilege (Vass, 2016) and to discriminate against gender diverse students and teachers (Grant et al., 2021). Ironically, Fraser (2019) would argue that it was through attempts to address many such injustices that enabled neoliberal politics take root in the current policy environment.

Fraser (2019), writing in the US context, contended that the 'new left' politics of the 1960s and 1970s through to the 1980s had a focus on injustices associated with identity politics and that

class injustice largely became ignored, as patriarchy, institutional racism and heteronormativity displaced capitalism as the perceived primary cause of injustice (see AUTHOR for discussion of the English context). Further, Fraser (2019) contended that neoliberal politics embraced many of the new left's political arguments, which also facilitated its foothold in contemporary politics. For example, one of the key arguments of the new left was the need to remove bureaucracy and to give local communities more voice in local decision making—the need for 'self-management' was a key claim of Australian left political movements that had a history of resistance to, for example, the Vietnam war, the South African Springbok rugby tour, uranium mining and the erosion of civil liberties in states such as Queensland. Those articulating neoliberal politics had similar critiques of bureaucracy and started to use the same language as the new left. For example, 'self-managed' schools (Smyth, 1993) became a key plank in the neoliberal approach to schooling in Australia during the 80s and 90s.

It was not just the adoption of new left arguments that appeared to blindside the left to neoliberal politics, but the state's willingness to embrace some of the social justice arguments of the new identity politics. For example, the first national approach to education in Australia (which is the primary responsibility of the states and territories) was the *Girls, School and Society* report by the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1975), which argued for a more gender equitable curriculum, and the first national education policy, the *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (Education Council, 1987), which sought to ensure that girls were not locked out of curriculum options and that their representation could be seen in curriculum resources. This was accompanied by other concerns regarding the representation of other marginalised groups in the curriculum, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' histories, knowledges and cultures. Building on Fraser's (2019) argument, it could be claimed that while these changes have been important—and clearly have not gone far enough—a focus on them enabled neoliberalism to take hold of the educational policy arena, which is an example of what she referred to as 'progressive' neoliberalism.

In what is yet perhaps another co-option of progressive politics, 'equity' has become a stated aim of much educational policy, which has come to mean 'equality of opportunity' and providing everybody with the same opportunities to access a traditional curriculum is deemed to ensure a fair and just society. However, contained within this rhetoric is a denial of the structural factors (e.g., institutional racism, intergenerational poverty) that work against those from marginalised backgrounds, alongside an implicit assumption that success and failure are

by-products of individual effort. However, these 'progressive' approaches to identity politics in Australian curricula have not been unchallenged, as a consequence of what Fraser (2019) termed 'reactionary neoliberalism'.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, the regressive 'what about the boys?' debate challenged many of the gains made by girls in school with claims for the need to create more 'boy-friendly' curricula because the changes in favour of girls had gone too far (see AUTHOR for a critique of this debate). Similarly, there were claims that attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures and to multiculturalism had led to a demonisation of White Australia and its colonial history (see for example, Burgess et al., 2020). Much of this debate has been encapsulated in what became known in Australia as the history wars (Macintyre & Clark, 2003). These debates continue to shape curriculum making. Making sense of the practical implications of these debates and implementing change requires paying attention to social justice concerns. This will entail challenging both the progressive and the reactionary forms of neoliberalism that Fraser (2019) has identified. In what follows, we outline what we consider to be the key curriculum tensions relevant to social justice and then democratic schooling.

Curriculum and social justice

In their analyses of historical curriculum reform across Australia between 1975–2005, Collins and Yates (2011) identified three differing approaches to social justice and curriculum. In the first instance, New South Wales adopted an 'equality of opportunity approach', which saw schools retain academic subjects for all students (albeit with differing levels of difficulty) and vocational subjects being the prerogative of technical colleges. In the second approach to social justice, Queensland along with the Australian Capital Territory were identified as taking a progressive perspective that sought to disrupt hierarchical forms of knowledge giving equal value to academic and vocational forms of knowledge. The third approach—evident at times in South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania—had a focus on minority group outcomes, their representation in the curriculum and ensuring that students had a common curriculum (sometimes referred to as 'essential learnings'). These different curriculum approaches to equity concerns demonstrate that social justice through curriculum reform is complex.

This is not helped by curriculum being a somewhat ambiguous and contested term (Green, 2018; Reid & Price, 2018). However, we are attracted to Pinar's (2012) view of curriculum:

‘Simply stated, curriculum is what the older generation chooses to tell the younger generation. … The school curriculum communicates what we chose to remember about the past, what we believe about the present, what we hope for the future’ (p. 5). As such, it is highly political in terms of what is included and what is left out, and while there might be attempts to be as inclusive as possible there are always going to be limits to inclusions.

The curriculum is also hierarchically organised with some forms of knowledge valued over others. For example, STEM subjects in high school are often favoured over the humanities and social science ones. As such, there have been multiple attempts to address the underrepresentation of girls in STEM, yet few campaigns to address the underrepresentation of boys in the humanities. There are also vigorous debates about the types of knowledge to which all students should have access. The subsequent understandings created in respect of the focus and purposes of education clearly have social justice implications. In particular, we have to review the orientation of the curriculum and the kinds of knowledge that young people have access to, and query whether we enable all young people to have access to what might be deemed to be what Young (2008, 2013) referred to as ‘powerful’ knowledge. Young (2013) posed the question: ‘What is the important knowledge that pupils should be able to acquire at school?’ (p. 103). He argued that ‘the curriculum must start not from the student as learner but from a student’s *entitlement or access to knowledge*’ (Young, 2013, p. 107, emphasis added). Moreover, in Young’s (2013) theory, curriculum must be ‘powerful’:

- It is specialised, in how it is produced (in workshops, seminars and labs) and in how it is transmitted (in schools, colleges and universities) and this specialisation is expressed in the boundaries between disciplines and subjects which define their focus and objects of study. In other words, it is not general knowledge. This does not mean that boundaries are fixed and not changeable. However, it does mean that cross-disciplinary research and learning depend on discipline-based knowledge.
- It is differentiated from the experiences that pupils bring to school or older learners bring to college or university. This differentiation is expressed in the conceptual boundaries between school and everyday knowledge (p. 108).

Supporters of this view have argued that ‘powerful knowledge’ is often found in the habitus of ‘the powerful’ in society and denying young people access to it perpetuates social hierarchies (Beck, 2013). We agree with Young’s concerns regarding ‘access’ to powerful knowledge; however, we contend that the this should not be one of ‘either/or’ curriculum. Young

acknowledged this relationship between experiential/'funds of knowledge' (González, 2005) and a subject-based curriculum. However, a key difference is in the structure and purpose of the different types of knowledge. Young (2013) contended that experience is context specific, and while concepts learned in this way can be usefully applied to new contexts and experiences, this learning is still context specific:

> The coherence of everyday concepts, such as it is, is tied to particular contexts, and without the opportunity to engage with the concepts of a subject-based curriculum, children's under- standings are inevitably limited to those contexts and those experiences. In contrast, the concepts associated with a subject-based curriculum are not tied to specific contexts. … It is this difference in structure that enables students with access to subject-based concepts to generalise beyond their experience and provides the educational rationale for the curriculum and its links to the broader purposes of schooling. (p. 110)

The tension between the extent to which schools balance community knowledges with subject specific knowledges has become a key debate around the provision of socially just schooling. However, like curriculum, 'social justice' is a term that is also variously understood and contested (e.g., Olson, 2008; Sen, 2011; Young, 1990). For the purposes of this paper, we utilise Fraser's (2009) understanding of social justice as 'parity of participation'. To achieve parity of participation:

> Justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (Fraser, 2009, 16)

Therefore, to create a socially just curriculum depends upon issues of access to all forms of knowledge, including powerful knowledges, so that these are not arbitrarily assigned according to assumptions about students' abilities and outward appearance of engagement. To contribute to a 'dismantling of institutional obstacles' through the curriculum, questions have to be asked regarding who gets what type of curricula, how categories of people are constructed in those curricula, and what input do marginalised groups (including students) have into what is enacted in the classroom. For example, within the current climate of comparative performativity, teachers in poorly performing schools report that 'designing responsive, inclusive and engaging pedagogies are very difficult to maintain' (Comber & Nixon, 2009, p. 343), as they are compelled to focus on fragmented test practice in basic skills. This approach simultaneously promotes 'less-inclusive classrooms where students have less voice' (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013, p. 310).

There are several premises that underpin the social justice implications of this approach, including the need for an education system with broad purposes—committed to benefiting society and individual wellbeing beyond academic outcomes—and that a rich socially just curriculum is central to high-quality, high-equity schooling. Inhibiting parity of participation are economic, cultural and political injustices, which are brought about through an unequal distribution of resources and social goods, by various forms of discrimination and through the denial of a voice in key decisions impacting upon one's life.

In a distributive sense—taking a high-quality curriculum as a social good—a just arrangement is one in which all students experience the same quality social good, which can only come about through a *common curriculum*. This does not necessarily mean the curriculum content is identical in all locations, but that all students experience a curriculum with common features. Within such a curriculum, all young people engage with important disciplinary concepts, are intellectually challenged, and enabled to critically frame knowledge.

The place of the canon is a matter for serious discussion in relation to social justice. The work of Young (2013) on powerful knowledges, Green (2018) on curriculum, representation and democracy, and Connell (1993) on curricular justice are good starting points for such discussions. For example, Connell (1993) argued that curricular justice involves the reforming of curriculum in the interests of those least advantaged by the system, while, as noted earlier, Young (2008) claimed that providing all young people with access to 'powerful' forms of knowledge—usually reserved for elites—is an act of social justice.

A socially just curriculum is also one that does not erase difference but has 'recognition'—or cultural justice—as a central tenet. Such a curriculum belongs in the kind of common school described by Fielding and Moss (2011), which they argue 'starts from a profound respect for otherness and singularity and a desire to experiment, to create new knowledge and new projects [and has] a distinctive identity and [is] a place that welcomes and nourishes diversity' (p. 88). A common high-quality curriculum then would regard 'recognition' and the importance of making the curriculum meaningful to young people a central concern of curricular justice. For example, it would take claims to decolonise the curriculum seriously. In so doing it would draw on, and build upon, the backgrounds and knowledges of students and their communities; it would acknowledge the ways in which culture shapes worldviews; and it would make connections to the world beyond the classroom, often through the use of problem-based assessment.

Student and teacher voices, positioned here within the principle of representation, that is being seen and heard, and thence political justice (Fraser, 2009), are also important for the construction of a socially just curriculum. While we recognise that many young people 'do not know what they don't know' and that the curriculum has to open them up to new worlds, this does not mean that they should be side-lined in curriculum decision making or that community knowledge should be ignored. Further, a socially just approach to curriculum would facilitate teachers' contributions to what is covered in their classrooms—any attempts to 'teacher proof' curriculum works to de-professionalise teachers and ignores their knowledge of their own students and their communities. A socially just curriculum would thus be concerned with representation—ensuring that the voices of teachers, students and their communities are heard in creating curricula. A process of 'community curriculum making' (Leat & Thomas, 2016) is one example of how such negotiations can take place. Leat and Thomas (2016) suggested that community curriculum making projects, among other attributes, emanate from students' curiosity and draw upon the local community's resources. As such, the enacted curriculum created through this process is negotiated, albeit led by teachers, with students and their communities. Such a curriculum would also seek to demonstrate the ways in which young people can have an impact on the worlds in which they inhabit—through the enhancement of active citizenship.

As indicated at the start of this paper, Connell (1993) observed that 'the issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about' (p. 15). This is most certainly true of the curriculum. Here we have suggested that such a curriculum would ensure that young people from marginalised backgrounds do not have access to a lesser curriculum than those from privileged backgrounds, that difference is recognised and valued and that those who are most often marginalised from educational decisions are engaged in curriculum making decisions. These three areas of justice overlap and at times may appear in conflict with each other. Enacting a socially just curriculum requires teachers who are knowledgeable about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, reject deficit constructions of young people, and have deep commitments to and understandings of social justice.

Curricular justice and democratic schooling

Fraser (2019) has claimed that the dominance of neoliberalism as a political force is less certain than it once was. She suggested that populisms of the right (e.g., Trump, Johnson and Brexit) and left (e.g., Sanders and Corbyn) have served to undermine faith in the market as a tool for

determining public policy. She was hopeful that a new politics based on progressive populism will serve to create a more socially just society. We share some of these hopes and along with them that schooling might make its contribution to this society. To do this, we have to ensure that young people in schools are provided with the political tools to participate in and to create such a society, and that this provision is not just limited to some students.

This will mean going beyond empty rhetoric. Connell (1993) argued that 'school systems commonly claim, in statements of goals, to be preparing future citizens for participation in a democracy' (p. 45). For example, the national declaration on the goals of schooling for young Australians—the *Mparntwe Declaration* (Education Council, 2019)—states that all students should become active and informed members of society, who 'are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations' (p. 8). These goals, while somewhat ambiguous and open to diverse political interpretations, can only be achieved if *all* young people have opportunities to engage with a rich common curriculum that unpacks the complexities of democratic participation and that facilitates the acquisition of critical thinking and the skills to apply their knowledge.

By a 'rich common curriculum', we mean learning choices available to all that have relevance to the worlds of young people, contribute to their preparation for work or further learning and provide opportunities for engagement with a broader knowledge base connected to critical understandings of culture and society. This will mean challenging some long held schooling practices. For example, many young people who become disengaged from school are forced to attend lower-level classes which deliver less-challenging curricula or purely vocational subjects, or are required to attend education sites specifically constructed for low-achieving or 'misbehaving' students (AUTHOR). We have confronted these issues of curricular (in)justice and in equity in our work on alternative forms of schooling (e.g., AUTHOR). We have argued that young people—regardless of their behaviour, perceived abilities, and life circumstances—would be better served by remaining in the mainstream schooling sector rather than being filtered off into flexi-schools, which provide an alternative for young people who have disengaged from or become disenfranchised with mainstream schooling (te Reile et al., 2017) and their equivalent. However, as many young people have indicated, the choice is not mainstream or flexi-school, but flexi-school or no school (AUTHOR).

A similar logic can be applied to curriculum, in which all students would be better served by engaging with a 'rich common' curriculum rather than being directed towards low-level, low-demand curricular options. It is often assumed that it is better that students be doing some learning than no learning, although they are siphoned off from the mainstream curriculum. This is not something that is supported by the very young people who are supposedly happy to be in a place where they are not challenged to achieve. This is reflected in some marginalised young people's view in one such setting that 'We are not exactly learning. We're just completing it and handing it in' (AUTHOR). We contend that this is not good enough, and that all young people deserve access to a rich, high-quality curriculum that offers a meaningful education. According to AUTHOR, a meaningful education is:

> One that builds a bridge between their personal contexts and needs and a desired future. … constructed in such a way as to avoid deficit assumptions of young people; assist them in filling in the gaps in their formal education; extend their educational horizons and plot pathways of possibility towards the future. (p. 613)

Similarly, Mayer (2002) defined meaningful education as an activation of knowledge through problem-based learning. Karpicke and Grimaldi (2012) claimed that the application of knowledge in critical and creative ways enabled meaningful education, whereas Newmann et al. (1992) took a student-centred view of meaningful education, in which the learner perceived their learning to have significance. We contend that each of these views of meaningful education offer important nuance, and that a commitment to socially just schooling requires a curriculum that enables intellectually challenging and rigorous knowledge creation and application in ways that are meaningful for young people.

In this paper we have associated democratic schooling with socially just schooling. We realise that 'democracy', like many of the concepts we have employed in this paper, is also contested (AUTHOR). However, for us democracy cannot operate unless there is a commitment to social justice through the enabling of 'parity of participation' for all young people, especially those who are least advantaged by the current system. Focusing on curricular justice in schooling will go some way to removing the 'institutional obstacles' that prevent such parity.

We recognise that there will always be tensions about what to include in the curriculum due to the limited time that young people have in school and the competing interests within and between different disciplines. However, we want to push past historical approaches to curricular justice—it has to be more than providing equal opportunities, it has to be suspicious

of being differentiated, and it cannot be solely about outcomes and visibility of marginalised groups. For us, as with Pinar (2012), it has to be concerned with what kind of future world we want to live in and with providing young people with the skills and knowledge to create such a world. Charles Sturt University draws attention to one such educational approach from the local Wiradjuri people, which is encapsulated in the phrase 'Yindyamarra Winhanganha'. This translates to: 'The wisdom of knowing how to live well in a world worth living in.' We would suggest that in these uncertain times, confronted by, for example, climate emergencies, increasing right wing populism and global pandemics, this is a fine underpinning principle by which to create a socially just, democratic, rich and meaningful curriculum for all young people, which lives up to its name.

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