

Teachers thinking critically about student context



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The realities of teaching are far removed from the image of an unbiased teacher filling the empty minds of untainted subjects. Instead, the teacher enters their classroom with preconceived ideas and assumptions before even meeting their students (Gobby & Karnovsky, 2017, p. 62). The students enter the classroom with a 'virtual schoolbag' of experiences, knowledge and ideas about the world (McGregor & Mills, 2017, p. 373). Even the classroom itself resides within an education system which currently operates to promote the success of some types of people at the expense of others (Gobby & Millei, 2017, p. 48; Gowlett & Niesche, 2017, p. 355; Monchinski, 2008, p. 119). When left to progress without question, these factors can limit the educational opportunities available to students (Down, 2017, p. 121). Using socio-economic status [SES] as an example, this essay will outline the way that student contexts currently cause educational divides. It will then illustrate the ways in which these divides are reinforced by the culture of the education system. It is then argued that the application of critical analysis by teaching staff can begin to reduce the educational inequalities that exist in the education system. Finally, it is argued that the use of critical pedagogies can help teachers empower students to create a more just world for themselves. The use of critically reflective practice, where teachers seek out and question common assumptions, norms and practices (Down, 2017, p. 119), is vital to the reduction of inequality in education. Teachers need to acknowledge and understand the cultural powers causing advantage and disadvantage in their classroom. They can then critically assess the norms and assumptions working to further strengthen these powers, adjusting their teaching methods to increase the educational opportunities available to all students.

The social contexts of students control educational outcomes in Australia. In an ideal world, students from all backgrounds would have an equal opportunity to access education and achieve success. This is one of the goals of education in Australia (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008, p. 7). Yet, the reality of education in Australia looks different from this ideal. Social characteristics such as gender, race, location and SES are overwhelmingly linked to a student's level of schooling success (Gowlett & Niesche, 2017, p. 356). For students with a low SES, this divide in achievement begins in primary school, as shown by the 2017 NAPLAN results (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017). These results reveal that as a national average, for all year levels and in all domains tested, mean scores increased as parental education levels increased. The same results were found for parental occupation groups, where student mean scores increased as the rank of the occupation of at least one of their parents increased. These statistics demonstrate a sizeable achievement gap between those born in to relative wealth and status and those who are not. In addition to a significant achievement gap there is also a significant completion gap. For example, 60% of students in the lowest SES decile complete Year 12 or an equivalent qualification, while almost 90% of their peers in the highest SES decile achieve this (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab & Huo, as cited in Gowlett & Niesche, 2017, p. 355). Leaving school early can be associated with lower income levels and higher rates of unemployment (OECD, 2012, p. 3). This leaves students who come from a lower SES with lower employment prospects for life. Students from a lower SES are one of many cultural groups who are disadvantaged in the Australian education system. Other

academically disadvantaged groups include Indigenous students, males, and students living in regional or remote areas (Lamb et al., as cited in Gowlett & Niesche, 2017, p. 355). By using critically reflective practice, teachers can reject the traditional deficit model where these disadvantaged students are labelled lazy or incompetent (Down, 2017, p. 122). Instead, teachers can reflect on the powers causing disadvantage and alter their pedagogy to better meet the unique needs of their students. The cause of the achievement gap is not due to the failure of the students or families to measure up, but rather, the failure of the school system to deliver relevant and meaningful content to these students.

Educational divides are reinforced by the current system. Males, Indigenous students, students from remote areas and students from the bottom five SES deciles do not have lower-than-average completion rates due to being unintelligent or having a poor work ethic (Bauman, as cited in Pearce, 2017, p. 203). This type of deficit thinking of disadvantaged groups is an alarmingly common assumption among teachers (Mills & Keddie, 2012, p. 12). The issue lies predominantly with a broken education system which was designed for certain types of students and which values middle- and upper-class types of knowledge and behaviours. Teachers themselves are predominantly middle-class Anglo-Australians who tend to embrace the cultural values of that group (Allard & Santoro, as cited in Mills & Keddie, 2012, p. 9; Pearce, 2017, p. 209). Thus, disadvantaged students are often behind from the moment they begin formal education, carrying with them behaviours, knowledge and experiences that are not always valued by schools and teachers (McGregor & Mills, 2017, p. 373). Bourdieu (as cited in McGregor & Mills, 2017, p. 375)

describes these gaps in middle-class experiences and skills as a lack of 'cultural capital'. Labels are often ascribed to these students, such as 'slow' or 'naughty', which commonly come to define the relationship these children have with their teachers for the entirety of their school years (Pearce, 2017, p. 204). Inequality is then further entrenched by government policies. These policies include the promotion of school choice, and a one-size-fits-all national curriculum. A report by the OECD (2012, p. 10) suggests that when parents have complete choice over their child's schooling, segregation tends to occur. This leads to greater inequality, with whole schools becoming disadvantaged. Studies also show that when students attend a school with a more socio-economically diverse population, they have a greater chance to succeed (Teese, 2010, p. 31). The segregation of students into low or high SES schools therefore poses a problem when trying to achieve equitable access to education for all students. The policy of a national curriculum poses an additional problem for equity. The national curriculum reflects the ideology of the stakeholders of the times, therefore presenting limited viewpoints which may exclude particular groups of people (Pearce, 2017, p. 209). The national curriculum also intends to regulate the content that can be taught in classrooms (Gobby, 2017, p. 17). National high-stakes testing then encourages teachers to stick to the curriculum and discourages creativity in the classroom (Walker & Gobby, 2017, p. 329). The results of this narrowing curriculum are rising levels of disengagement from school, with one in four students in Australia failing to complete secondary school (Lamb et al., as cited in Gowlett & Niesche, 2017, p. 355). Walker and Gobby (2017, p. 329) argue that the adverse effects of high-stakes testing are most prominent in schools servicing low SES areas. This creates a

conflict of values between what schools are teaching and what students want to learn. Teachers need to reject the idea that some students are doomed to fail and embrace the belief that all students can become engaged in learning (McGregor & Mills, 2017, p. 377). This is a core tenet of critically reflective practice. The principles of critically reflective practice can help teachers make a difference in their classroom and increase the chances of success for disadvantaged students.

Critically reflective practice can reduce the effects of classroom inequality. Critically reflective practice means questioning the assumptions that teachers and policy-makers may take for granted. It is acknowledged that teachers on their own cannot eliminate all inequalities faced by students in the education system (Monchinski, 2008, p. 119; Smyth, 2012, p. 11). However, teachers can make a difference and successfully engage students who would otherwise have missed out on learning opportunities. If the norm is to assume that students are failing because of their lack of ability or family circumstances, and therefore they are beyond help, critically reflective teachers need to instead form a relationship with these students and together identify the unique barriers they are facing (Pearce, 2017, p. 207). Once the real barriers are identified, rather than simply assumed, the school, student and family can find ways to help the student overcome these barriers. Another common assumption is that the students in disadvantaged schools aren't capable of learning to the same level as elite schools, and thus deserve an 'easier' curriculum. In reality, research shows that a rigorous curriculum of high expectations helps students in socio-economically disadvantaged schools achieve higher learning outcomes

(OECD, 2012, p. 136). This shows that there are ways for teachers to bring more opportunities to disadvantaged students, if they are willing to challenge common assumptions. Teachers also need to be critically reflective of their own long-held views. This is especially true as the profession is largely made up of middle-class Anglo-Australians (Allard & Santoro, as cited in Mills & Keddie, 2012, p. 9; Pearce, 2017, p. 209). As such, they may hold pre-conceived ideas about the different groups of students found in Australian schools. Teachers need to realise they may hold biased assumptions and that these assumptions are typically reinforced by the official curriculum and policies created for schools (Pearce, 2017, p. 209). If these assumptions are recreating inequalities in their classroom, teachers need to actively work against them. It is impossible to be neutral in this case, as by refusing to change their habits, the teacher is actively agreeing with the assumptions and policies which are creating disadvantage (Down, 2017, p. 120; Horton & Freire, as cited in Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2014, p. 94). By integrating critically reflective practice into their work, teachers can begin unravelling the power that social norms have over students and expand their educational opportunities. By integrating critical pedagogies into their classroom, teachers can also demonstrate to students the way to question unjust customs in their homes and communities.

Critical pedagogies can empower students to challenge inequality themselves. One of the goals of education in Australia is to help create confident, active and informed citizens who are ready to participate fully in society (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7). One of the ways teachers can do this is by using critical pedagogies in their classroom. Teachers who do this do not

merely impart pre-packaged knowledge onto eagerly awaiting students, rather, they encourage students to see this knowledge in its own social and historical contexts (Down, 2017, p. 127). They teach students how to research and become critical thinkers themselves, continuing to evaluate the information they will be bombarded with in their everyday lives. Teachers using critical pedagogies have a classroom build on democratic principles, where students have a say in how learning happens and what they learn (Down, 2017, p. 129). When students have input into what happens in the classroom, they are participating in curriculum negotiation. This is one of the core principles of student-centred teaching and learning (Walker, 2017, p. 462). The OECD (2012, p. 136) recommend integrating student-centred instruction with the nationally administered curriculum and assessment practices to achieve better academic outcomes for students in disadvantaged schools. Smyth (2012, p. 13) argues that the practices of middle-class schools which rely on blind compliance simply will not work in socio-economically disadvantaged schools. Schools instead need to become listeners, giving students and families a real say in how learning will happen (Smyth, 2012, p. 13). This may then empower them to rally for change in other areas of society (Smyth et al., 2014, p. 100). Gobby (2017, p. 22) argues that the way the classroom is organised teaches children about how the world works. They learn about power and authority. Classrooms which are organised in an authoritarian manner may implicitly teach students how to obey authority or accept the consequences (Gobby, 2017, p. 22). Students in this type of classroom may feel they have no voice to stand up for witnessed injustices. By operating the classroom in a more democratic way, students can learn how to become active democratic citizens and how to

make their voice count (Smyth et al., 2014, p. 100). Most importantly, all students are more likely to engage in their learning if they have had a say in the way it will happen (Walker, 2017, pp. 462-463). Thus, using critical pedagogies increase the educational opportunities available to students. Critical pedagogies also enable the teacher and students to achieve a greater understanding of the cultural powers that exist in our society to cause advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

The school system that teachers currently work in was created by and for the advantaged groups of society. Australian education is rife with advantaged and disadvantaged students, with a large gap between those who succeed and those who do not. A deep understanding of the societal powers creating these divides is required by all teachers who wish to be a part of the movement of change towards a more equitable education system. Teachers also need to realise how the education system itself feeds into the existing inequalities by the way it is structured and orchestrated. However, understanding these powers alone is not enough to change them. Teachers need to possess the courage required to go against commonly held beliefs and assumptions about the way students learn and the capabilities they possess. Critically reflective practice is the crucial component needed to get there. Critically reflective practice seeks out the ideas and behaviours which may cause inequality, followed by actively working to change these ideas and behaviours. Critically reflective practice also brings critical pedagogies into the classroom, recognising that by equipping students with the skills to question information and norms, a ripple effect can begin to spread out into the broader community. Students are given a greater voice in the classroom.

They can then use these critical thinking skills to create democratic changes in their world. Teachers alone cannot eliminate the structural inequalities of Australia's education system. They can, however, engage their students with more equitable styles of learning, and begin to equip them with the skills and passions to have more control over their own futures.

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