FORUM

The Socially Just School: as a way of putting the 'public' back into public education and the public school

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ABSTRACT This article argues that re-inserting the 'public' back into public education and public school involves the reclamation of the indigenous (i.e. native) language and practices of schools and their communities. It argues that banishing the interloper discourses of neoliberalism can only occur when schools organise themselves around the alternative discourse of *the socially just school.*

Background and Genesis

This article addresses the theme of this special issue by highlighting the systematic degradation and destruction of public education and public schools (state funded and provided schools that exist to educate *all* children), and the way this has largely occurred through back-door forms of privatisation that have been under way since the early 1980s.

The article is written by an academic scholar/activist using a grassroots reform process to articulate a radical alternative, informed by critical social theory. This approach is argued to be an 'indigenous' one, in that it is 'native to' and emerged out of the practices operating in a group of Australian schools. The article will describe how this radical alternative, as it existed in fragments within these state/public schools, was spoken into existence.

The Australian context of this article began in 1992, when the state of Victoria embarked on one of the most extensive and destructive attempts anywhere in the world to privatise a democratic centrally provided school system. The program known as the *Schools of the Future* – parodied by one commentator as *Schools of the Führer* (Jennings, 2000) in reference to the tyrannical state premier Jeff Kennet who introduced it – resulted in the closure of 300 schools, the sacking of 3000 teachers, and a downsizing of the central

support for schools and teachers by 75%. This disastrous experiment (Smyth, 2011) ricocheted around other states' education systems in Australia, and was adopted/resisted to varying degrees.

The antidote that some schools in the state of South Australia developed took the form an archetype we called the *socially just school*. For me personally, the genesis of the socially just school resided in the personal imperative I had at the time to find a way of 'speaking back' to one of the most damaging 'reforms' ever inflicted on public education in Australia, or anywhere in the world, for that matter.

In part, the socially just school came about as a school-based response to politicians and policy makers who were bent on privatising state schools in Australia by having them operate like businesses, or, as I have put it, 'stand alone profit centres' (Smyth, 2018, p. 471). In many respects, the socially just school is an antipodean extrapolation, with local inflections, of the very best attributes of comprehensive and secondary modern schools in Britain, so vigorously and admirably defended by Benn and Downs (2016).

One of my earliest forays into seeking to give expression to a radically democratic alternative to the slaughter of public education under way in Victoria was my 1993 edited book called *A Socially Critical View of the Self-managing School* (Smyth, 1993a), containing the most vocal critics from around the world who were speaking back to the marketisation of schools in their respective contexts. The book was a direct rebuttal to the claims of cheerleaders and celebrants of the *self-managing school* (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, 1998). In response to Ball's (1993) claim that 'the state was left in the enviable position of having power without responsibility' (p. 77), I coined the term the 'self-*damaging* school' (Smyth et al, 2014, p. 5) to highlight the way schools were being armed to inflict damage on themselves through being given the power to cut their own resources, under the illusion of autonomy and flexibility. This book drew a lot of anger from politicians and their supporters in the academy, but it also became a rallying point for besieged teachers, school, parents and communities who could see the impending decimation of public education in Australia and beyond.

Out of my activist opposition to the marketised turn of public education systems in Australia, I began to develop a theoretical alternative that spoke to a democratic and social justice intent. I called it 'the socially just alternative to the self-managing school' (Smyth, 1996).

The groundwork of this alternative did not start until I took up the Foundation Chair in Teacher Education at Flinders University of South Australia in 1993. That state had a long history of social justice that was still very much alive, and it was a fertile place in which to sculpt out an alternative in a practical way. In my inaugural professorial lecture I reflected on my deep and growing concern:

> …we must find a viable alternative, if we are to have any future as a
> country and anything worth calling a 'public education system'. The
> kind of ideological distortions currently being allowed to intrude

into the way we conceive of and organise schooling, is nothing short
of scandalous, and is being allowed to proceed unopposed…
We need a different vista, a different vision – one that is both more
trusting of our intuitive senses of *what is best for all our children,* and
one that is deserving of the vast numbers of highly committed
teachers who hold our schools together. We need processes that
above all hand real and significant control back to the people who
know best – teachers, in concert with parents – not the econocrats!!
(Smyth, 1993b, p. 16)

The detailed empirical critical ethnographic work in/with schools and their
communities that was necessary to construct this alternative came in 1996 with
a grant from the Australian Research Council under the unlikely title 'Lifelong
Learning for Teachers'. This obfuscation was necessary in order to secure
funding to find out how teachers were engaging with their schools and
communities in forms of learning that amounted to developing alternatives to
the privatised reforms being inflicted on schools. This research was, in effect,
tracking and surfacing how schools were working 'under the radar' and
against/in spite of the system.

The eventual 'product' of this decade-long research, which we called the
Teachers' Learning Project, was a series of 17 modules – nine case studies of
schools and eight school-based topic books, available from various Australian
university libraries through the Worldcat system – encapsulating and reflecting
what courageous schools were doing to sustain and maintain a viable alternative
to the marketised thrust under way in schools. The titles of these eight topic
books were:

1. *Enhancing Teacher's Learning* (Hattam et al, 1999)
2. *Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning* (Smyth, McInerney, Hattam &
   Lawson, 1999)
3. *Promoting Student Voices* (Hattam et al, McInerney, Smyth & Lawson, 1999b)
4. *School Culture as the Key to School Reform* (Smyth, McInerney, Lawson &
   Hattam, 1999)
5. *Enhancing School–Community Dialogue* (McInerney, Smyth & Lawson, 1999a)
6. *Developing Middle Schooling Practices* (McInerney, Hattam, Lawson & Smyth,
   1999)
7. *Making Socially Just Curriculum* (McInerney, Hattam, Smyth & Lawson, 1999)
8. *Embedding Information Technology in the Curriculum* (Lawson et al, 1999).

All were dealt with in an expanded form in *The Socially Just School: making space
for youth to speak back* (Smyth et al, 2014).

These professional development materials came from detailed case studies
of 13 schools in South Australia officially deemed 'disadvantaged' – two outer
urban primary schools; a combined primary/junior primary school; two urban
high schools; a cluster of five rural secondary schools; a year 6-12 purpose-built
middle school; a senior secondary distance education school; and a remote

aboriginal school. These schools were 'purposively' selected because they displayed some prominent aspect of working to make a difference in the lives of their students, families and communities, and they were working outside of/against system reforms.

These materials were reviewed by Alex Moore, who summarised their merits thus:

> It is precisely through its emphases on inclusive, whole-school and whole community involvement, and on what we might call 'risky learning', that the *Teachers' Learning Project*, in an insistent, understated but ultimately reassuring way, offers teachers one means of challenging and contesting what McLaren has called the 'prevailing conceptualizations of what constitutes knowledge and truth and their pedagogical means of attainment' (McLaren 1986: 58). If, to use McLaren's configuration, the Project does this 'steadily' rather than 'vehemently', it is no less effective for that. Indeed, it is, arguably, more so, since its invitations to take up a critical or oppositional stance remain firmly rooted in what is possible and reasonable at the local level of action, but that this also suggests possibilities for moving beyond individual subversions to more collective forms of transformative action.
> (Moore, 2001, p. 276)

What is the Socially Just School?

What emerged from our research was a set of consistent themes or dispositions as experienced by a group of schools, at a particular time, and in a particular place. These dispositions or orientations were not a recipe, a model or a prescription to be applied elsewhere. Rather, they were a provisional archetype set of orienting philosophical ideals, or recurring aspirations, that others might try out to see how they worked, or not, in their situation.

Underpinning these themes was an unswerving commitment to a democratic form of schooling – one that was open to all students, and that involved a wide-ranging exploration of ideas inextricably embedded in the history and culture of the local neighbourhood in which the school was located, while showing students the connection between what they are learning locally and wider global forces. These schools had a deeply held view that rating and ranking students to produce hierarchies was anathema to their success-oriented view of learning. These schools were committed to accountability, but not of the narrow synthetic kind that pitted schools and students against one another in some kind of competitive educational Olympic Games, in which only a few mounted the winners' podium. They did not regard themselves as being primarily accountable to the whimsical vested interests of others distant from their schools and classrooms and the communities they served – and they had the courage of their convictions to say so! In other words, these were schools that had developed a profoundly rooted philosophy that was deeply embedded

in their practices, and which they were able to use to powerful effect to speak back to others trying to steer them from a distance.

In the same vein as Benn (2018), these were schools that had developed a very clear position on what they stood for, for whom, and why – which made the questions of who the school existed to serve and 'whose system is it anyway?' (pp. 71-85) quaintly redundant. The matter of whose interests the school served was being reinforced through the school's daily practices, made even more poignant by the fact that these were schools in areas designated as 'disadvantaged'. One of the most consistent questions in the philosophy, dialogue and debate that framed how these places worked was: 'how is this place working to advance the learning of the most disadvantaged among us?' In other words, the question was how was the school being inclusive of those students and families who, under normal conditions, would find the school to be a most inhospitable place? To that extent, these were schools that had a highly tuned sense of what it meant to live in a socially just way.

The socially just school regarded itself as a crucial *social institution*, not just as a convenient conduit to the job market. It saw itself as having a crucial role in advancing the life experiences and chances of *all* its students, not just the ones whose backgrounds and values fitted with those of the school, especially in the following respects:

Disadvantage is not an individual deficit to be attached to, or used to describe, some groups of students who are supposedly 'at risk'. Rather, 'disadvantage' is regarded as being socially constructed, an outcome of the way society allows wider social, economic and political forces to operate invisibly and unimpeded. The imperative responsibility of the school is to work with students and their families to expose how the opaque working of power and advantaging actually operates.

Student failure is not an inevitable or natural state of affairs for some students. Instead, the eradication of failure is dependent upon the way the school pursues policies, pedagogies, structures, curriculum and forms of learning that result in success (i.e. *success-oriented learning*).

The starting point for learning is regarded as being *students' lives, histories, cultures* and *backgrounds*, and the school sees it as its responsibility to show students how they might make connections between their lives and the wider forms of knowledge in the world of which they are a part.

Knowledge is not seen as a propriety domain or commodity owned or possessed by some, while being denied to others, or that exists hierarchically. The school regards knowledge as a process of co-creation with students and their families that taps into the richness and diversity that is the school's community.

Educational policies developed at a distance and without the involvement of the school and its community are not taken as prescriptions to be unproblematically applied. Rather, educational policies are viewed as provisional propositions to be tested out experientially through the lens of the question: 'how is this [policy X] likely to advance and improve the lives and

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educational experiences of students in this school?' Regarded in this way, policies become entities to be recast in the light of local experience, or else abandoned.

Student disengagement, which is regarded in traditional forms of schooling as an individual transgression or infraction by students, who are then punished through punitive 'behaviour management policies', is seen in a completely different light. Student disengagement is recast as a curriculum/pedagogical issue. That is to say, when students are disengaged or disconnecting from learning, it is not a student problem, but rather an institutional or systemic problem brought about because the curriculum is irrelevant or taught in an uninspiring way, and it therefore needs to be re-invented.

Relationships are crucial to everything that occurs in this school, such that without relations, there is no learning. The school thus celebrates and regards as a source of pride the way it interacts personally with every student and their family. The way it does this is diametrically opposed to the way other agencies that connect with the clientele do by demeaning, disparaging and labelling them through institutionalising and depersonalising relationships – they are considered to be 'problem cases', 'vulnerable', or in needing remedying, as part of a category or group.

Leadership is not conceived or enacted hierarchically, nor is it seen as residing in status or high office. On the contrary, leadership is envisaged as being contingent, and hence highly dependent upon the circumstances, and upon who has the requisite skills and expertise at a particular time and place. Leadership, therefore, can come from anywhere – students, parents, community members, and even, sometimes, teachers and principals.

Cooperation is prized and promulgated over and above competition, which is explicitly rejected as being a way of further advantaging the already advantaged.

Reporting and assessment of the results of learning are regarded as matters that rightfully reside with students – in terms of their form, how learning successes are to be demonstrated, who has the right to know about them, and what might need to be done in terms of future development.

Image, brand and fake-impression management for purposes of self-promotion and aggrandisement, and used as a means of garnering 'market share', have no place in this school. The view held is that 'good stories' emerge naturally and don't have to be manipulated, manicured or massaged into existence.

The obvious question, then, is: how is the socially just school a living, breathing exemplar of what it means to put the 'public' back into publicly provided schooling and education? There are several possible responses:

First, because these schools disavow rampant individualism of the hyper-competitive kind, the socially just school can devote more emotional, psychological, psychic and fiscal resources towards creating schools as 'public spaces' – places where a multiplicity of voices can be heard, and where controversial ideas can be explored and debated without fear of retribution.

Second, because these schools are not 'selective' in the sense of excluding some students and families based either on bigotry or because they might possibly damage the schools' 'brand', they have a more humane and humanitarian understanding of educability based on inclusion.

Third, because these schools are 'open to all', they deem it to be unnecessary to be engaged in wasteful, diversionary and destructive process of competing for clientele and 'market share'. By refusing to play the neoliberal game, they can stay much more focused on their primary purpose of enhancing quality learning.

Fourth and finally, in Benn's (2018) language, the tenor of the 'conversation' has dramatically changed in these schools, and there is a 'return of the professional' in driving learning forward through 'a passion for learning' by all. None of these are seen as priorities in the marketised, privatised school that is unconcerned about an education for everyone's children, and for which parents exist as dutiful 'consumers' driven only by the desire to 'get the best deal' for their progeny.

What, then, are the obstacles and impediments that have to be confronted and overcome by the socially just school? No matter how we choose to frame the answer to this question, in the end it comes down to one thing – a preparedness and conviction to envisage another imaginary, and having the courage to refuse to be defined by fear. Neoliberal schools, with their managerialist mantras and their phoney claims about choice, self-management and autonomy, are deeply mired in a view of human nature that is primarily driven by self-interest. The socially just school rejects such views, in place of a more humane, hopeful and inclusive view of education *with* and for *all*.

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