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Students Researching 'Problems That Matter' in Their Communities

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ABSTRACT In this article, the authors argue that curriculum needs to change, bringing school knowledge into greater proximity to community 'problems that matter' (PTMs) and gathering students, community members, teachers and academics with relevant knowledge to work on the problem. Illustrating this orientation through a collaborative project in a local high school, the authors provide a rationale that links school knowledge with community 'funds of knowledge' – those rich cultural resources that build across family and local-community networks as people apply intelligence to conditions affecting their lives. PTM curriculum activity thus builds capacities for social-justice activism, driven by ethical care for the needs and aspirations of people in communities on the horizons of schools. However, despite the good intentions of many who educate in schools, they are not simply free to take up alternative curriculum practices, even when shown as more socially just, and effective in engaging students and building knowledge abilities useful in their present and future lives. Schools are caught up in power relations that help produce social inequality. Policies from 'above' press down into school leadership decisions and classroom practices, pushing schools into competition with each other rather than fostering care for local communities. The authors argue that schools owe an ethical duty of care to the communities, especially marginalised groups, that they are supposed to serve. Supporting young people's agency in collaborative work on meaningful PTMs can give schools impetus to align with better social purposes for curriculum knowledge activity.

Toxic school days ... except Tuesdays

> 'I hated going to school ... except Tuesdays. When I woke up on Tuesdays, I wanted to go to school'.

We quote one of four Year 9 students, who all endorsed his statement, when presenting at the Student Voice, Agency and Partnerships International Conference (SVC) in Melbourne, December 2019.

Their school serves students mostly from working-class, refugee and immigrant families. Like most such schools, their school channels students into separated curriculum paths. Small numbers, seen by teachers to show 'high achiever' academic capacity, are recruited into a middle-years 'accelerated' program that leads, in senior years, to a university-bound path. While, at the end of Year 10, all students supposedly can 'choose' university or vocational paths, many – seen as 'low achievers' in terms of academic capacity, including the four presenters – are, along the way, steered towards vocational paths.

Yet, rather than students lacking capacity, might the problem be that mainstream curriculum lacks capacity to engage them – because it limits options to work actively with a range of knowledge, and applies standards that sort students into 'higher' vs 'lower' achievers? Does the curriculum fail the test of meaningful relevance to students' present and future lives?

Teachers who worked with those students on Tuesdays came to see the point of such questions, to which we will return. Let's first consider how Tuesday's knowledge activities point the way to more expanded, and more socially just, curriculum possibilities.

On Tuesdays: A 'Problems That Matter' curriculum

On Tuesdays, these students, among others, participated in an unusual curriculum initiative led by Simon Taylor under the sponsorship of the Footscray Learning Precinct (FLP). This is a new state priority focussed on STEAM [science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics] in inner-suburban Footscray, involving collaboration of two primary schools and an emerging multi-campus secondary school with Victoria University and Maribyrnong City Council (MCC).

Simon built on the idea of 'students as researchers' of community 'Problems That Matter' (PTMs), about which Lew Zipin and Marie Brennan had written (Zipin, 2013; Brennan, 2014; Brennan & Zipin, 2018; Zipin, 2020). A Community Reference Group (CRG) met with students at the beginning of term to identify and co-develop a theme important to local communities. They arrived at Environment, around which student groups developed local projects. CRG members were also asked to be available to students for follow-up questions and research, and were invited to return to an exhibition of the students' inquiries into the theme at the end of the projects.

On Tuesdays across Semester 2, 2019, students from each FLP school came together. With the support of teaching staff, they formed self-organising teams around environmental projects. Approximately 80 students were involved: 12 Year 9 students, 24 Year 7, 44 Year 5. Each team was led by a Year 9 student and included a mix of Year 5 and 7 students. The roles of teachers were to provide structure and scaffolding by modelling 'Design Thinking' processes and to support the Year 9 students in developing skills required to mentor and lead their respective teams.

Each Tuesday, all students worked in their teams until lunchtime, followed by a session between participating teachers and Year 9 mentor students in the afternoon to reflect together on co-design and practice. Industry and community experts worked with student teams to open up issues for student researchers to consider. As examples: the senior sustainability officer from MCC briefed the students on climate change; Tom Quick spoke about riding a recumbent bike to the four points of Australia; and Tamra Hoare from the Primary Health Network spoke about young people's health and well-being.

The students took up the STEAM 'Learning Laboratory' style of research work with alacrity. They moved from acting dependently, such as asking teachers to solve their problems ('I don't know'; 'I need help'), to steering the directions of their projects ('Can we get this printed?'; 'Could you get the phone number on X, so we can go on with this, please?').

As trust grew between teachers and Year 9 student leaders, so did the willingness of students to give honest feedback on their perception of the learning environment. On one occasion, a student leader reflected on how the group dynamic in her team changed when a teacher was present. She analysed the tendency of the teacher to 'take over' and for younger students to become more passive when the teacher was present. Teachers began to reflect on their tendency to solve problems for students, to suggest strategies and ideas when students appeared stuck, which led teachers to reflect on their positions as authorities, when they should instead co-learn with students about the PTMs driving a group's project. All staff agreed that taking a step back, to make room for students to grapple with problems independently, took effort on their part to change established teaching habits. Student voice achieved parity with teachers through working on the community problem.

Student agency increased in this process of co-designing projects together. They came to trust teachers to listen and dialogue with them, and they became more active as organisers. When three Year 9 students discovered that Simon was coming to work early on Tuesdays to prepare spaces and materials (as all teachers do), these students were adamant that they should arrive early to assist.

Other examples involved students identifying and contacting community members with knowledge relevant to the theme, and organising their involvement in their projects.

Different teams investigated specific environmental concerns and interests, around which they developed suggestions for further action. Examples of projects include proposals for:

- increasing canopy cover and urban tree coverage in the community, to encourage more students to walk and cycle to school;
- kerbside recycling of organic waste by Maribyrnong Council; and
- a system to reuse containers for liquids like detergents and drinks (milk, juices).

At the end of the semester, students presented on their projects to CRG and FLP representatives. Further presentations, and lobbying for action, were made to

the MCC and to schools, among other agencies, extending student research into activism. Students presented on their research experiences to FLP's Vision and Leadership committee, chaired by Jim Williamson and including Department of Education regional directors.

Students spoke about how they re-engaged with learning through their projects. They advocated for broadening this learning process within their schools.

Late in the year, Simon called a CRG session to develop a theme for 2020. This time, Year 9 students chaired plenary discussions and sub-group brainstorming to nominate community-based PTMs. The overall theme that emerged from the session, while named 'Community Health and Well-being', specified issues as diverse and activist-oriented as high food costs; gentrification that threatened Footscray's multiculturalism; urbanisation that curtailed public space for recreation and sport; and the need for infrastructure to support the mental health of young people from diverse cultural groups.

The presentation by the four Year 9 students at the SVC in December 2019 articulated this sense of activism. The students and a participating teacher explained the projects, and responded to questions from an audience of students, teachers, academics and policy people. Audience excitement about new potentials for curriculum and pedagogy could be heard in words and seen in body language.

The Year 9 students spoke knowledgeably about an illustrative project that mattered to them – on reducing local-community waste – as well as how they learned from the younger students they mentored. As quoted in tweets by audience members (see Figure 1), the students explained how they felt new capacities to engage in learning as active and confident agents, beyond the passive-resistant inertia they experienced in schooling-as-usual (that is, on days other than Tuesdays!).

PTM Curriculum: putting knowledge to work with and for communities

In the same SVC session, Lew and Marie presented the argument for a PTM curriculum approach, using the graphic in Figure 2.

A community-located problem that matters (a PTM, on the right side of the graphic) attracts to it what Moll et al (1992) call 'funds of knowledge' (FK). These are rich cultural resources that build across family and local-community networks as people apply intelligence to conditions affecting their lives. Households and communities, say Moll et al (1992, pp. 133-134), 'use their funds of knowledge in dealing with changing, and often difficult, social and economic circumstances' across 'multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed'.


svcmelbourne 4h
vicsrc_gram
"At the start of the year I wouldn't have been able to sit up here and answer questions. Since being part of the STEAM Labs I have better personal skills, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills"
@SVCMELBOURNE
100
Send message

Figure 1. Tweets at the Melbourne Student Voice, Agency and Partnerships International Conference, December 2019 (first published in *Connect* and used with permission).

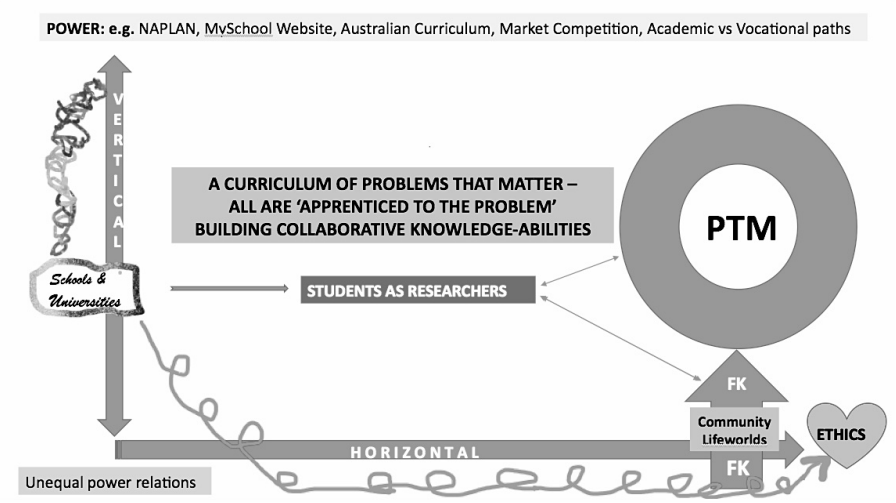

Figure 2. Community-located problems that matter: graphic from Lew Zipin and Marie Brennan presented at the Melbourne Student Voice, Agency and Partnerships International Conference, December 2019 (first published in *Connect* and used with permission).

Young people bring their FK into schools as informal feelings and thoughts about their life circumstances, which provide the 'conceptual fabric' for further learning, says Moll (2014, p. 35). If curriculum engages with their FK, then school subject-knowledge gains meaningful relevance to what matters in students' lives beyond school. In turn, school knowledge strengthens capacities to analyse and explain those significant matters.

Our graphic suggests that curriculum can build rich interactions across life-based and school-based knowledge by putting students to work as action-researchers of PTMs they identify as mattering for their communities. Ideally, students co-research PTMs with teachers, and with family and community members.

By 'community', we mean local areas that include diverse social groups, whose lives are affected in varied ways by PTMs. This diversity should be represented in PTM-based action-research. It is also important to link local PTMs to wider global issues – for example, local fires link to climate change – for which science, civics, humanities and arts knowledge all apply. School subjects, and those who teach them, should thus make interdisciplinary contributions to knowledge activity around a PTM.

If university academics from relevant disciplines are recruited into collaboration with students, teachers and community members, they can contribute further expertise to understanding PTMs as local–global matters.

Crucially, what gathers diverse people and knowledge is the *problem* that matters to all. By later primary school age, students can take central roles in bringing participants together in the research, dialogue and action on PTMs. Those who collaborate around a PTM are not just passive knowledge-receivers but active knowledge-makers. In listening to, learning from, thinking and acting with each other, they build mutual respect for the varied experiences and knowledge that everyone, *including students*, brings to the table. In sharing 'apprenticeship' to the problem, say Pignarre and Stengers (2011, pp. 76-77), they create 'new means of grasping a situation', 'new ways of acting, of connecting, of being efficacious'. These capacities for *knowledgeable democracy* are greatly needed as new generations face matters of rising urgency for their futures (as we all now face local–global environmental and virus/health urgencies).

PTM curriculum activity thus builds capacities for social-justice activism, driven by ethical care for the needs and aspirations of people in communities on the horizons of schools. 'Ethics' is thus our label for the horizontal axis in our graphic.

Yet school subject-knowledge typically excludes, rather than engages, FK. Curriculum typically stands 'isolated from the social worlds and resources of the community', note Moll et al (1992, p. 134), and so 'teachers rarely draw on the resources of the "funds of knowledge" of the child's world outside the context of the classroom'.

What causes schools to close off from FK, ignoring the rich learning potentials that Tuesday teachers in the FLP project came to appreciate? We here need to consider how forces of power, pervading schools, work against a social-justice ethics in educational practice.

Power That Works against Ethics-Oriented Curriculum

Despite the good intentions of many who educate in schools, they are not simply free to take up alternative curriculum practices, even when shown as more socially just, and effective, in efforts such as the FLP initiative. For one thing, schools are immersed in historically formed relations of unequal privilege and power – along race-ethnic, class, gender and other lines of division – that underlie all social institutions. We thus put 'unequal power relations' at the base of our graphic's vertical 'power' axis. With silent effect, these underlying inequalities influence many dimensions of school practice, such as the centrality, in standardised curriculum, of the ways of knowing more familiar in cultural environments of powerful social groups. In turn, the FK of less powerful groups are marginalised or excluded. Thus, in school assessing of academic 'achievement' across students from diverse social backgrounds, 'high' vs 'low' achiever systematically (with 'exceptional' cases) correlates with power of family position.

Along with such underlying effects of power relations, policies from 'above' press down into school leadership decisions and classroom practices.

These include a standardised national curriculum, tests such as NAPLAN [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy] and other statistical measures of school 'performance', compared in the federal government's *My School* website. These narrow policy effects push schools into niche-market competition for the appearance of 'good performance', and thus 'reputation', that leads parents to choose a school over others nearby from similar pools of students.

In response, secondary schools with students mostly from power-marginalised class and ethnic groups – schools with limited resources to invest in supporting all students to achieve academically – typically invest in 'gifted' or 'accelerated' programs for a small set of students selected as showing 'high-achieving' potential. Since statistics about students on vocational paths do not 'count' in the same ways, students perceived as 'low' in academic capacity are often steered that way. Some schools develop unfortunate habits – for example, discriminatory application of school uniform policy, detention for lateness – that chase those seen as 'lowest-level performers' to nearby schools.

Increasing policy pressures on schools to compete in niche markets thus induce school staff to look *vertically* upward to where power from above judges the *school*'s 'performance'. Staff then are seriously blocked from giving attention *horizontally* to:

- substantial community matters for present and future living;
- community-based FK that these PTMs stimulate and attract; and
- how school subject-knowledge can join FK in applying to these matters.

Instead, secondary schools that 'serve' less powerful groups are led to divide student cohorts, investing academic achievement support in those who can make the school look good, while writing off others as 'not academically capable', in the process further marginalising – rather than caring for the needs and growth of – those already most marginalised.

Sadly, people in marginalised communities do not have power to hold schools accountable to *their urgencies*, in ways that policy makers do. Yet, FLP curriculum projects demonstrated that so-called 'low achievers' can achieve academically if their rich FK are cross-fertilised with richer purposes for school knowledge than sorting and selecting for 'high' vs 'low'.

Don't schools owe this, as a prime *ethical duty of care*, to the marginalised groups on their horizons? In ethical care for students and their communities, let's go horizontal!

In the contrary tugs on school curriculum – between forces of power, on the one hand, and community needs for knowledge and action, on the other – a PTM approach seeks to strengthen the horizontal impulse of ethical care due to students in/with their communities. As educators, whether in schools or universities, we live these tensions, sometimes consciously, sometimes in latent emotional distresses.

Our graphic shows that we see our *institutions* – schools and universities – currently pulled quite far up on the axis of policy compulsions, not at the base

where ethical impulses might tussle out more socially just curriculum possibilities that contest the pulls of power. The strings of policy power – pulling schools and universities upward on our graph – are tightly corded. Our squiggled connection to communities on the horizon needs strengthening. Yet this is no easy task.

The SVC sought to take on this task. Its themes were 'voice, participation and agency', as goals for all students and schools, including in shaping curriculum. We take these themes to desire democratic practice in which students engage with knowledge for socially just purposes. Yet many secondary students at the conference found themselves troubled between desiring such goals and questioning their feasibility. Their main expressions of doubt hinged on their experiences that, from Year 7 onwards, they felt themselves in acute competition to achieve high ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admission Rank] scores for entrance to desired university programs. They saw their own competitiveness as contradicting the conference themes.

We here note that these students were all 'high achievers' in the eyes of their schools, which funded them to attend the three-day conference. They further attested to emotional distress under pressures to be 'winners', with staff providing the remedies of relaxation classes, therapy dogs and well-being counsellors. Indeed, these testimonies disturbed teacher, academic and policy-making 'adults in the room'. Some students critically analysed these remedies as band-aids masking systemic causes; but analysis doesn't relieve distress or fix deeper causes. We don't doubt that school staff want these 'remedies' to help students cope.

Yet it is hard to say where the balance lies between care for students and worry about the school suffering legal risk and loss of reputation.

We further note that 'high achievers' were the entire secondary student population at this conference ... *except* for the four students in our presentation session. These students, the so-called 'low achievers', had a very different diagnosis of their pains of *alienation* from 'school as usual' that feels irrelevant to their lives, negates their capacities to achieve, and does not support their futures in ways that feel honest.

For them, *the Tuesday alternative* generated a thrill of actual possibility, whereas the 'high achievers' had trouble imagining curriculum not harnessed to ATAR 'achievement'.

In short, students within a wider school system are divided, by how schools treat them, in ways that are cruel on both 'sides' of the 'high' vs 'low' distinctions. The education practices that produce these separations and associated emotional disturbances are *wrong* in two senses: they are *incorrect* in labelling actually capable students as 'low' in capacities for learning and they are ethically *unjust* in the distresses they cause across the divide.

With recognition of how challenging it is to work against the grains of power exerting on schools and in curriculum, we call on 'adults in the rooms' of education practice to find it even harder to let such wrongs set the directions of our labours. Let us listen to, learn from and work with all students in the rooms,

and their communities beyond the rooms, towards ending the divides and supporting better social purposes for curriculum knowledge activity.

We hope that our account of the students' FLP work with a PTM approach, and of the rationale for this approach, encourages impulses, commitments and experiments for *going horizontal*.

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