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Collaborative inquiries into literacy, place and identity in the changing policy contexts: implications for teacher development

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with Helen Grant and Marg Wells**

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In this chapter we describe a history of collaboration between university-based literacy researchers and school-based teachers in teacher development programs and practitioner inquiries designed to improve literacy outcomes for students living in low-socioeconomic circumstances. We consider how an inquiry stance has informed teachers working for social justice through curriculum and pedagogy designed to connect children's developing literacy repertoires with their changing material, social and linguistic contexts. We use examples from the practices of two of our long-term teacher-collaborators to show what has been possible to achieve, even in radically different policy contexts, because of teachers' continued commitment to themes of place and belonging, and language and identity.

Introduction

Teacher development, like many aspects of contemporary educational work, is often thought about as a context-free zone (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). Frequently it is assumed that a one-size-fits-all approach will work for everyone, everywhere. However, teachers' professional learning and action is subject to the effects of many contextual factors including policy shifts, teachers' pedagogical knowledge, their professional and personal identities, their locations in particular neighbourhoods, their student populations, and the organisation and cultures of their schools as workplaces. Historically our experience suggests that teachers may contest new curriculum and pedagogy with a familiar refrain: "I couldn't do that with these kids in this school". Indeed, referring to schools in low socio-economic areas, Thomson has described this phenomenon as 'thisness' (Thomson, 2002).

'Thisness', Thomson (2002, p. 73) argues, is about understanding the school as "a particular material place":

Each school 'place' is a distinctive blend of people, happenings, resources, issues, narratives, truths, knowledges and networks, in and through which the combined effects of power-saturated geographies and histories are made manifest.

Thomson goes on to explain that, as a place, the school is "embedded in context and cannot be detached from it. It is simultaneously 'context derived' and 'context generative'". She provides a useful checklist for thinking about 'thisness' – the specificity of each school context – in terms of the school mix (population: migration, transience, cultural groups, employment, income, housing, domestic violence, substance abuse), neighbourhood resources (community infrastructure, employers, volunteers, local and school facilities, local narratives) and neighbourhood issues (school closures, local feuds, factions and tragedies). For our purposes here, the concept of 'thisness' is useful in understanding why teacher-research is so important to teacher development, especially in the contexts of high cultural diversity and low socio-economic conditions, where deficit views of students sometimes circulate (Comber & Kamler, 2009). Later we describe how two teacher-researchers are able to make their 'places' – schools, neighbourhoods and the journeys that people have travelled

to be there – the objects of study with young people. These teachers, in Thomson’s terms, have made ‘context generative’ for pedagogy, in places where others have assumed deficit.

Educationally, the challenge of attending to the specific and nuanced contextual conditions of places and people, that is, to situated lives in particular places, is always in tension with the need to contest the deficit discourses that circulate in the community about ‘these kids’. By such accounts, socio-economically disadvantaged young people and their families are assigned the blame for educational failure. The implications of systematically attending to context with respect to teacher development are rarely explored when systems develop new policies (see Lupton this volume). The unproblematic development of curriculum and pedagogy, without teacher input, and for place-less generic student populations, was challenged many decades ago with the emergence internationally of teacher-researcher movements, which have been significant, and particularly in the field of literacy education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

In this chapter we briefly consider the emergence of teacher inquiry movements in education in connection with questions of local context and teacher development. We then introduce two teachers with whom we have conducted collaborative inquiries over the past fifteen years and with whom we share reciprocal learning relationships and a commitment to social justice. These teachers exploit place as a resource for ambitious curriculum design and pedagogy. To conclude we discuss the implications of local collaborative practitioner inquiry for teacher development and education policy.

Locating teachers’ work: practitioner research for social justice

The work of teachers is local, situated, embedded and contextualised. It has always been thus. As Green (2009) argues, “practice is always *contextualised*; it cannot be thought of outside some notion of ‘context’” (p. 8). This may be especially important for educators with a commitment to social justice who have long argued the need to pay ongoing and serious attention to the question of context and its connection with unequal educational outcomes and the need to develop “contextualised models of practice” (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 317). This is not to suggest that there are no commonalities across contexts, including across countries, in this time of economic globalisation. As Pauline Lipman’s (2004) detailed study of urban education in Chicago demonstrates, urban education, political economy and the

cultural politics of race are tightly interconnected because of “the global connection of markets, production sites, capital investment, and related processes of labor migration” (pp. 5-6). The economic, political and cultural dimensions of large cities world-wide are increasingly shaped by the same processes of economic globalisation even though the outcomes may manifest differently. Nonetheless, Lipman draws our attention to the fact that one of the *common* outcomes of globalisation and economic restructuring is “a new set of constraints on education” (p. 11).

The accountability movement, so dominant in recent education policy and systems world-wide, refuses to acknowledge the fact that teachers’ work is necessarily local, contextualised and differentiated. In its drive to make teachers and education systems accountable to the so-called ‘public’, the movement “assumes there is consensus across society about what it means to be educated, whose knowledge and values are of most worth, and what counts as effectiveness” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 10). However, as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) point out:

even as teaching becomes more and more public, it remains at its heart, radically local—embedded in the immediate relationships of students and teachers, shaped by the cultures of schools and communities, and connected to the experiences and biographies of individuals and groups. (p. 10)

This characterisation of the practice of teaching as ‘radically local’ begins to capture some of the nuances of the *contexts* in which teaching is carried out: it occurs in social relationships—relationships between teachers and students who have specific histories and biographies—and it occurs inside the cultures of schools and communities, each of which is complex and multiply inflected by dimensions of social difference (see Lupton this volume).

Further, not only is the practice of classroom *teaching* complexly context-dependent, but teacher *development* too must necessarily attend in some measure to local contextual factors if it is to be successful. In their extensive review of the literature, Luke and McArdle (2009) note that: “there is a tension between the central prescription of professional development programs and their optimal realization in local school contexts” (p. 234). They cite Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2005) finding that “central policy mandates and priorities were

frequently the impetus for effective school-based professional development and changed classroom discourse and practice” (Luke & McArdle, 2009, p. 234). But, as they go on to show in their review of the professional development research and school reform literature, local and context-specific factors and alliances also and always play a key role. Historically, teacher-research movements have played an important part in supporting forms of teacher development that both take account of, and are responsive to, the local conditions of schools, regions and communities (see recent syntheses of the field in Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dixon & Green, 2009; Noffke & Somekh, 2009).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note that a distinct feature of practitioner inquiry is its capacity for “problematizing the ends question” (p. 9) in education rather than taking it for granted. Since the late 1990s this has involved questioning the assumed goals of schooling as they are framed in policy by asking “what purposes—besides academic achievement as indicated by test scores—are important in schools?” (p. 9). Further, a unique feature of practitioner inquiry is the importance it places on community as “both important contexts within which teachers and other practitioners identify the issues they see as important and as one of the major vehicles that support their representations of their ideas” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 54).

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) reiterate the important role that *inquiry as stance* can provide for teachers across their lifespan as “a kind of grounding within the changing cultures of school reform and competing political agendas” (p. 120). They emphasise that, fundamental to an inquiry stance, is “a critical habit of mind” (p. 121) that informs all aspects of professional work. Through inquiry, practitioners “make their own knowledge and practice problematic and also make problematic the knowledge generated by others” (p. 131). A key point, then, is that an inquiry stance assumes that “part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change” (p. 121) for the benefit of all.

Teacher inquiry is “partially speculative research because it is about the larger process of imagining alternatives for students who have been most vulnerable in our schools” (Campano, 2009, pp. 332-333). Such an approach, which foregrounds “local and little stories” (Griffiths, 2009, p. 31), is especially important in times such as ours when “public

money and status are again linked with large-scale impersonal research” (Zeni, 2009, p. 265).

In these times:

we need action researchers to tell the human stories. We need them to insist that research to improve one’s own practice is a professional responsibility, part of good teaching. We need them to show that good research can aim higher than gains in test scores, and that democratic classrooms are possible. (Zeni, 2009, p. 265)

In summary, the new managerialism currently impacting on the work of educators and the lives of students has been accompanied by urgent calls from critical educators for a reinsertion of the ‘human’ into the discourses and practices of education. This is seen as a necessary move on social justice grounds; a move that can be assisted by continued collaborations between university and teacher researchers who support each other to develop a critically inflected inquiry stance as they focus on things that matter to local communities.

Teachers who research ‘place’: the pedagogical affordances of context

...there’s no test for if a child can stand up in front of the whole school and run an assembly... I mean that is an incredible skill. There’s no test for going out there and being a peer mediator in the yard, which can be a battle ground, and mediate for students in an argument. No test for that. There’s no test of whether a student can make a film and win a competition and go and get a really wide audience to see their film and love it. And question people; come up with some kind of question about their work. No test for any of that. There’s no test for them, teaching another, the junior primaries or older and younger peers, peer teaching. There’s no test for that. (Teacher Helen Grant)

Uncannily echoing Zeni’s request to ‘aim higher’ than higher test scores, Helen Grant, long-term action researcher and teacher, powerfully articulates some of the repertoires of communicative practices that she fosters and values in her students – the long-term outcomes of her innovative and ethical pedagogy responsively designed and enacted *in situ*. We use Grant’s words to introduce this section of the chapter because they aptly demonstrate how she works with the micro-politics and resources of everyday school and community life to design her curriculum for speakers of languages other than English.

While there are decades of research about the ways in which schools reproduce inequitable outcomes for poor and working class young people, we have comparatively fewer accounts of what makes a positive difference to their learning (for exceptions see Hayes et al, 2006; Thomson, 2002). Our long-term collaborations with highly committed and successful teachers of culturally diverse and low SES (socio-economic status) students suggest that ongoing teacher inquiry is a key component of ‘successful teaching’ in such school communities. Taking an ‘inquiry stance’ allows teachers to analyse the complexities and dynamics of their classroom communities and to design curriculum based upon their knowledge of students in their contexts. Teacher inquiry brings context into the foreground and it brings the specifics of particular students’ learning into focus. Teacher-researchers examine what’s going on in order to:

- interpret how students are making meanings
- analyse the kinds of teacher modelling, explanations, feedback and social organisation that make a difference to students’ learning
- integrate students’ resources and investments into curriculum
- open up positive learning trajectories for students who may be alienated or marginalised from schooling.

The teachers we discuss in this chapter engage in all of the above and in addition they explicitly make place and identity central to students’ literacy development. We now briefly turn to the work of Marg Wells and Helen Grant, two teacher-researchers who have taken these approaches to an art form over an extended period during which time we have continuously witnessed their innovative and culturally inclusive literacy pedagogies and their effects. Both exploit the affordances of their contexts and communities as dynamic and changing resources for learning and representation. In many ways they make ‘thisness’ an asset, by working with their students to analyse what is happening in their place, starting with the classroom, the yard, school, the neighbourhood, the wider state and extending out globally as appropriate.

Marg Wells was an early childhood teacher when we first met in the early nineties during a longitudinal study of children’s literacy development in disadvantaged school communities.

Over time she began to work with students in grades three and four, the years of primary school that are frequently ignored (Comber et al., 2002). Since that time Wells has taught continuously in schools in the low SES western suburbs of Adelaide in an area known as The Parks, which is undergoing urban renewal. Wells had already been influenced by work which suggested that teachers could build on children's home literacies in designing school curriculum, particularly by incorporating elements of popular culture into the classroom (Dyson, 1993; Kavanagh, 1997) and, as the area around the school began to change with urban redevelopment, she began to bring the neighbourhood into her curriculum in innovative ways.

Helen Grant is an ESL (English as a second language) teacher who works with a high percentage of recently arrived refugees and migrants. Grant has always been interested in questions of language, identity and social justice and she has done teacher research focussing on these issues for many years. More recently Grant has worked with students not only as viewers and critical consumers of popular culture, but also as producers and designers of media texts with specific social goals that represent students and their cultures in powerful ways.

This section of the chapter draws on interviews, observations, our archive of teacher and student artefacts, and ongoing research from across a fifteen-year period and into the present. We first show how taking 'an inquiry stance' manifests in the ways Wells and Grant approach their work, before turning specifically to their engagements with 'place' as pedagogical.

Inquiry as stance in teacher development

"Developing a researching profession" (Gunter, 2009, p. 101) is key to sustained improvements to student learning and engagement because it allows teachers to do the analytical and interpretive work necessary for understanding their particular students in context. That both Wells and Grant have researcher dispositions is evident in the number of action-research projects and practitioner inquiry groups in which they have participated (See Table 1 below). Even though they have been teaching for decades, they continue to regard themselves as learners and their teaching as 'evolving'. They remain energised by their ongoing curiosity about how they can best support their students' learning.

Date	Research and development project or program
1994	<i>Literacy acquisition and the construction of success and failure in disadvantaged schools</i> (funded by university development grant)
1996	<i>Literacy acquisition and the construction of success and failure in disadvantaged schools</i> (funded by state government education department)
1996-1998	<i>Language Australia Child, ESL & Literacy Research Node</i> (funded by commonwealth government education department)
1998	<i>A Project designed to examine the work of the South Australian community of teacher-researchers, Practitioner Research Communication and Mentoring Program</i> (funded by Spencer Foundation, USA)
1998-2000	<i>Socio-economically disadvantaged students and the development of literacies in school: A longitudinal study</i> (funded by Australian Research Council)
2000	<i>Doing teacher research: Documenting, disseminating and connecting, Practitioner Research Communication and Mentoring Program Grant</i> (funded by Spencer Foundation, USA)
2001	<i>Critical literacy, social action and children's representations of "place"</i> (funded by university development grant)
2002	University Bachelor of Education (Inservice) award completion (Helen Grant)
2004-2005	<i>Urban renewal from the inside-out: Students and community involvement in re-designing and re-constructing school spaces in a poor neighbourhood</i> (funded by Myer Foundation, Australia)
2006-2007	<i>Critical Literacy: redesigning school learning in high poverty communities</i> (funded by Australian Literacy Educators' Association)
2009	<i>Investigating Literacy Years 4-9: A pilot Study</i> (funded by state government education department)

Table 1: Research and development programs in which Wells and Grant have participated

In 1999, in the final interview for a project designed to assist teachers to incorporate new technologies into their literacy curriculum, we invited Marg Wells to ‘wrap up’ and give ‘final reflections’, ‘highlights and lowlights’ about that research and development project. She remarked:

The highlight would have to be the actual filming and seeing what we were getting back on those films and listening to what the kids were saying. That was definitely the highlight of the project. I suppose the lowlight is running out of time. The feeling that you didn't really get to a conclusion ... it's hard to know exactly where you're heading. You're always looking at what you get, and then you're asking questions about what you've got, and maybe there's no ending and wrap up and "Well, that's complete and in a neat little box". It doesn't tend to want to be boxed like that. I suppose it's more of researching and understanding and developing, rather than just an answer to a question that's going to be a set answer or a complete answer, and you can think, "Well I know the answer now" ... Instead it's been much more complicated than that, so as a project it's virtually going to be life-long isn't it. ... It's not something that's just going to stop.

Wells' selected project highlight, the films of the student interviews, indicates the ways she prioritises learning about and from her students. During the interview she spoke of the project as "opening up doors" and her desire to "find out more things". She described thinking about "Where to from here?" Her researcher disposition is evident in her contesting the 'wrap up' metaphor. When we interviewed Wells a decade later in 2009 she was still talking about the need to 'experiment', and she emphasised that having the space to be creative, which collaborative research and development projects offered her, is crucial. Working on challenging and demanding topics—such as 'spatial literacies' and urban renewal with architect and academic Stephen Loo (Comber, Nixon, Ashmore, Loo & Cook, 2006; Comber & Nixon, 2008)—has been important for her personal and professional well-being:

I like being challenged on that level, to be able to take on interesting ideas and look at what we've got, and see how that can be manipulated and expanded, just to be able to create something that's not the usual, not boring, something a bit more exciting and interesting, and relevant, and motivating, (*chuckles*), all those things. And it's not just for the kids. You want it to be like that for yourself as a teacher as well.

Similarly, Grant's views on professional development when interviewed in 2007 indicate that these teachers have developed the critical habits of mind identified by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009):

You have to have some kind of debate, and I think training and development, we should have debates. ... dialogue between teachers, because that's when you really ... if you're going to change, you're going to have to change a bit at a time, and think about what you're doing and why you're doing it.

As Grant explains it, the fabric of her work was developed not only from officially mandated materials, and from the many everyday texts and resources that come to hand, but "there's another layer of resources that we need ... resources ... what academics have done that allows us to think about what we're doing and why we're doing it as well." That is, reading research in the field and working collaboratively with university academics in

teacher-researcher communities has been important to her developing identity and expertise as a teacher.

Cochran Smith and Lytle (1999) argue that an inquiry stance among teachers is as much about posing questions as it is about answering them. Unlike teachers reported in some other studies (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins, 2004), Wells and Grant do not fear research; rather, data intrigues them and provides leads for developing student-responsive and richly contextualised pedagogy. Indeed Grant employed a detective metaphor to explain how she tunes into pedagogical possibilities provided by her students and how she follows up the ‘leads’ they provide. Grant cited one of her former students who alerted her to the critical literacy possibilities of artefacts like their Asian Studies text book. The female Thai-Australian student pointed out a photo of a Buddhist monk in the text book and questioned the wording of the caption that suggested he had a ‘begging bowl’ in front of him. She took issue with this, and emphasised that monks do not beg; people give alms. Because she is well-attuned to them, such moments provide Grant with rich opportunities for teaching critical language awareness (Fairclough, 1992) in ways that build on her inner-city migrant students’ cultural resources and allow them to do positive identity work as they grapple with critical linguistics.

As Grant put it recently, what her students accomplish “is way above the basics, way more sophisticated than that”. Moreover, she maintains that her inquiry stance and teacher research has been crucial in the development of this kind of high quality teaching and learning. She maintains that being “open for scrutiny” and “making public” her inquiries has assisted her the level of critical reflection that she has been able to apply to her practice.

Getting to know contexts and communities

In order to be able work with the affordances of their contexts and communities for students’ learning, teachers need to get to know the places and communities in which they work. Marg Wells explained how her principal in the first school where she worked in The Parks area took his staff on a bus tour at the start of the school year:

we did a tour around the neighbourhood, so you actually looked at the neighbourhood where your school was located, and you went past the housing, and you could see their

yards, their houses, the streets, where the parks were and the shops, and you just got a—feel for the area, and that was a really good thing to do, it was an eye-opener. And, as he said, a majority of teachers—because you don't seem to teach where you live—will drive into the car park and teach a day at school, and drive out afterwards, and will not know the lives that their kids lead. And I think, especially in disadvantaged areas, you need to know about your kids because it impacts so much on their learning, which impacts on your teaching, because if you're not aware of it, the kids won't be as successful, and you just won't be a successful teacher because they're not going to be engaged.

Similarly, Grant describes both the location and the changing nature of the community of her inner city school as important and rich resources:

We have students from 11 different countries in Africa. You know, a couple of years prior to that we had ...no kids [from Africa]. All of a sudden here they arrive, so that's what you do, you tap into everything around you so ... you go and get the stories and you film and you photograph, and you use their knowledge and experience and skills, and all of that, their stories, and you use that in what you do, so that's now changing again to more, you know, different, different refugees, more international students, from China, Taiwan, Korea so it changes. We've still got 40 plus languages here so it's a pretty rich kind of resource to tap into.

We're sitting within the square of Adelaide and surrounded by parklands and everything in the city, there, which we can walk to and tap into ... using the museum, art gallery, university, the connections.

At the same time, Grant argues the need to situate the local and immediate within successively wider contexts and influences:

I think that's important for us to know as teachers, which level you're going to work on, so if you can think of it as concentric circles, you might be working with a student, or a group, and you think of this as concentric, then you've got their class, and the next level you've got their year levels, then you've got the whole school, then you've got

school and our community, and you've got across South Australia, or national, across Australia, and you've got international, where would the students work across that? Will they be on a project that stays in class or goes across the school; an email project that goes international? ... That's how they work now, and we can do that, we can work on a global level.

Contexts and communities as dynamic and changing resources for learning and representation

We have collaborated with Wells and Grant in teacher-researcher communities working on action research and practitioner-inquiry projects. Our objective has been to mediate their work to the wider educational community by giving conference presentations and publishing in a range of formats for diverse audiences, including professional association newsletters and journals, professional development multimedia packages, university literacy education course materials and peer-reviewed academic journals.

In our view, one of these teachers' most significant achievements has been the creative and principled ways in which they have used the contexts and communities in which they teach as dynamic and changing resources for learning and representation. That is, not only do they get to know the local contexts and communities, they assist their students to make their contexts and communities objects of serious study in the curriculum. Using a combination of critical literacy approaches and an inquiry stance, Wells and Grant also instil in their students an inquiry disposition towards their neighbourhoods, their family and cultural histories, and their evolving identities *vis a vis* local and global circumstances. As Wells describes it:

I find I get the most interest when it's actually something that the kids are involved in, and they're interested in, and to me that's a lot of the community work and the things that are happening in their lives, and being able to find out that sort of information, and look at that because they know why they're finding it it means something to them, and then they can formulate questions because they understand that it's about them,

Since she began teaching in schools in The Parks area over 18 years ago, Wells has centred her curriculum and pedagogy on local and neighbourhood literacies, issues of 'place' and the theme of 'belonging' (Comber & Thomson with Wells, 2001; Comber et al., 2006; Comber & Nixon, 2008; Janks & Comber, 2006). The concept of Belonging has been

particularly productive for Wells as it has allowed her to integrate into her work two challenging aspects of her students' lives: their place within the major program of urban renewal—Westwood—carried out in The Parks since 1999, and the changing demographic of the area that has seen the arrival of refugees and migrants first from South-East Asia and more recently from parts of Africa. She explains the significance for students of being able to research and contribute to the process of urban renewal that surrounded them:

One of the very first projects I got involved in ... we were doing research on trees we did a walk around the neighbourhood and had a look at the trees in the street, and we noticed that a lot of trees were dying; some had even been set fire to, chopped down. The kids were complaining there were no trees in their street, and so we just looked into it a bit further and contacted the council, and, well virtually nothing was going to be done. The whole neighbourhood was on freeze because of the urban renewal project that was coming. So the kids were worried about some of the beautiful trees that were in the local park, whether they were still going to be part of the new area, or if they were going to be knocked down. And we contacted the project development, and we worked with them. Someone came to the school and talked to my class, and got them to design streetscapes of how they would like the streets to look when the renewal process was happening, and we sent all that, drawings and notes and information, to them and the project went on, and we were involved, and at the end of the project we had a letter come from them and the council, to acknowledge the kids' participation, and thanking them for their input, and valuing their drawings, and that made a big impact.....They got to see that you could actually do something. That in fact was the beginning of why I used a critical literacy approach more often, because I could just see that what was a nice topic on trees, ended having a lot bigger impact on them, on the kids, and on one teacher too in the long run.

This was the start of a long-term focus on enlisting students-as-researchers and enlisting the concept of Belonging. More recently, Wells reflected on the way that the changing student demographic meant that the Belonging concept had strong resonance for her students. Further, it was likely to remain important into the future, as students live with the knowledge that their current school is slated for demolition and rebuilding as one of the new schools designated by the government as 'Superschools'.

I think the multicultural aspect of the school is really... one of the reasons why I do it, because a lot of them have experienced a lot of change in their lives. They're coming here from backgrounds that we can't even imagine, and that they've just been experiencing, and what they've seen and what they've had happen. So to talk about the idea of Belonging. ... They are very much aware of what that's like and to feel unsettled and moving around, and our school counsellor came up with an excellent statement last night... that with the multicultural community—although we've tended to look at the *diversity* and accept diversity, one of the things that we also need to do, which will help develop cohesiveness—is to look at *sameness*, so to look at the things we have in common, and that could be similar goals, and sharing this new school, and so that made sense too, because I could see how we've only valued differences, but we also want to encourage, you know, collaboration and getting along, and we all do need to, you know, mix and work on the same site ...

Like Marg Wells, Helen Grant also aims to develop in her students a critical and questioning disposition.

Always, every lesson, I say to the children “Why are we doing this? What’s the aim of this? What do you think you can get out of this?” just orally to pull them in, to kind of engage with what we're doing. So I explain a lot while I'm doing things. I think that's an important one too, and just not to be, not to just accept everything around them. I like it when they question and ... give them the language to do that, so that they won't just think, you know, that article there on the internet is perfect and, you know, everything is right, because in fact it's not.

Grant works with different groups of New Arrivals students each term. She also works as a media studies teacher in mainstream classes and convenes a film club at lunch times. For over a decade she has worked with students to produce short films that focus on language and identity, initially provoked by the critical language awareness materials developed by Hilary Janks for South African students (Janks, 1993) and more recently supported by the multiliteracies framework developed by the New London Group (1996) and approaches to critical visual literacy (e.g. Callow, 1999).

Grant's work is clearly motivated by a social justice imperative. Her practice assists students to foreground and use their linguistic and cultural resources as they are positioned as agents in the production of significant media texts for public consumption. Although the students' films often present information about their mother tongue, family, music, celebrations and rituals, Grant sets out to problematise, rather than stereotype or trivialise, concepts such as 'culture' and 'cultural fusion'. Students learn about and share roles in the film making process. At the same time, they are involved in making fundamental decisions about language use, story-making, identity and social and symbolic power. As an example, in preparation for making the film *Cooking Afghani Style*, students investigated inscriptions on Afghani graves in a local city cemetery and collected photographs from members of the local community in order to first investigate and then represent on film the 'hidden' 19th and 20th century history of Afghani people in central and southern Australia (see Comber & Nixon, 2004).

During the time we have worked with Grant and Wells, each teacher has undertaken curriculum and pedagogical innovation in literacy teaching that has been documented by scholars and taken up as exemplary by other teachers. Reviewing this work we have noted the ways in which they have made the conditions of their schools and neighbourhoods, and their students' cultural and linguistic resources, at the heart of what they do. They have, in effect, made place and identity pedagogical. Wells describes this approach as using "what is right under your nose". For Wells and her students, the changing urban landscape of The Parks region has provided ongoing objects for literacy learning and representations of identity and preferred futures as children aged 8-10 years have undertaken projects about local trees and parks (Comber & Thomson with Wells, 2001), a local shopping complex and government services hub (Comber & Nixon, 2004), and the development of a garden in the school grounds (Comber et al., 2006; Comber & Nixon, 2008). In Grant's case, her students' identities as young people who have left one country to live in another, and who have come to learn English in a school located within the inner city, are explicitly made the object of study and text-production using the digital arts. This work has included an explicit focus on anti-racism and the production of bilingual films that disrupt dominant views of the cultural practices of migrant groups (*About Being Me; Waves of Culture; Cooking Afghani Style; Sudan*). It also includes student-produced films that focus explicitly on the connections

between language and culture (*Aussie Slang; Language Opens Doors*) and provide an alternative view of the aesthetics of the inner city where the school is located (*Hidden Treasures of Adelaide*) (see Comber & Nixon, 2004; Luke, Comber & Grant, 2003; Nixon & Comber, 2005).

From Disadvantaged Schools to Superschools: best and worst case scenarios

Internationally the new millennium has seen the rise of audit cultures in western education with increased attention to comparative measurement of literacy across nations. The rhetoric is that public schooling should deliver excellence *and* equity, the argument being that social background should not impact on academic performance. To this end we see globally in policy discourses the eclipse of disadvantage, poverty, and other words which may hint that context may make a difference to teachers' work and what student might accomplish.

Government teacher education rhetoric suggests that effective teachers will be successful no matter where, no matter what, no matter who. Generic pronouncements and expectations ignore both the affordances and limits of local contexts for learning and of teacher identities and histories. The assumption of standardised schooling solutions is evident in policy rhetoric, program designs, curriculum development and in the actual school buildings themselves. In closing we make brief reference to the way this discursive shift has played out in the context of the ways the Australian government now addresses the problem of material socio-economic disadvantage in planning new schools.

In the seventies the Australian federal government funded the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) to provide extra funding to schools who served low socio-economic communities – the kinds of schools in which Wells and Grant have taught most of their careers. Many of the projects funded under the auspices of this program encouraged local curriculum design, assessment reform and pedagogical practices that were underpinned by the intention to provide equitable education. A great deal of school-based action research was undertaken alongside these interventions and Australian educators enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. The DSP program ran until dismantled by the Federal Liberal Government in 1996 when it was replaced by the Commonwealth Literacy Program (CLP).

Thomson (2002) has undertaken a detailed comparison of the features of these two nationally funded programs, in terms of their mission, informing discourses, policy rationales, modes of

change, and importantly for our purposes the scope, sites and focus of action. She argues that: “Where the DSP focussed on the local” the CLP focussed on the “central and comparative” and that neither allowed for the “variable specificities of local/central relationships that this-ness implies” (Thomson, 2002, p. 179). Broadly speaking the period of transition from DSP to CLP was marked by a fundamental change in educational policy and practice with a bracketing out of social justice and explicit equity-driven programs to neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses of managerialism, individualism, standardisation and marketisation. Following Thomson (2002) our intent is not romanticise the DSP (or its era), as Thomson explains its shortcomings were noted by many. However, it did allow participating teachers and school leaders to design and enact complex local, responsive and critical pedagogies and curricula for and with particular groups of students.

Somewhat ironically a number of the formerly designated disadvantaged schools with whom we have long histories of collaboration are now to be replaced by so-called Superschools—new large schools being built in high poverty areas, often coinciding with wider urban renewal. These Superschools will replace smaller older neighbourhood disadvantaged schools. The change of vocabulary is not simply metaphorical but symbolises a complex material shift that involves the marketisation of public schooling to stem the flow of children to the private schooling sector. During the last decade we have also seen a discursive shift in educational policy from collaborative action research and the demand for evidence-based research with the capacity to prove the effects of various approaches and interventions on students’ measurable outcomes on a large scale.

As those of us who became educators during the emergence of teacher research movements in the 1970s approach retirement, there is a need to take stock, in this contemporary evidenced-based era, to review what we know, and to think about the implications for the future of the profession. Whilst baby-boomers need to guard against cynicism, there are certainly reasons to doubt whether “there is progress in education” (Shrag, 2009). Shrag (2009, p. 21), recalling Dewey’s insights about innovation, reminds us that breaks “from customary ways of doing school” are still rare. To conclude this chapter we first offer some optimistic principles for teacher development emerging from our work. These are perhaps best-case scenarios for a profession where there might be progress in terms of equal outcomes

from schooling. We then consider some risks for the future of the profession which our own stock-take and reflections seem to highlight for a worse case scenario.

In the best-case scenario teacher-researchers like Marg Wells and Helen Grant would have periods of ‘study leave’ and professional renewal; they would provide key input to pre-service education programs; they would act as mentors for beginning and jaded teachers. Their richly contextualised work on inclusive and critical curriculum and pedagogy would be documented in detail for others to learn from and captured in various media. The accomplishments of their students would be documented longitudinally, show-cased and celebrated publically. There would be some permeability in teachers’ trajectories that allowed them to move in and out of the classroom at various periods of their tenure perhaps to assemble new skills in various media or disciplines—perhaps the arts, using new digital technologies, a community language, critical discourse analysis or to work-shadow in a different professional space such as architecture. In an optimistic world the possibilities are endless; these are just a few of what might be on the Wells or Grant wish list, if we could break with customary ways of doing school, not only for students, but also for teachers.

But the signs are not all good... In a worst-case scenario teacher-researchers would be positioned as data-collectors for the system or trained interpreters (of other people’s data). Such ‘evidence’ might be used to prop up uniform context-free approaches to teaching and learning. One of the stark realities about reviewing our history of collaboration with these teacher-researchers is that it is increasingly difficult to make the time and space for this work—both for the teachers and for us as teacher-educators and researchers. The ground-rules are changing about what counts in our professions. Teachers are increasingly subject to national and state mandates in terms of testing and designated times for pre-specified curricula. In addition, a quick review of Table 1 indicates that teacher-research has always been conceptualised as something extra—project-based activity—often poorly funded for short periods, or alternatively built into post-graduate in-service course-work. It is not an integral part of what constitutes teaching, which makes it vulnerable. In the meantime, in the academy, increasingly the work that counts is that which is published for the scholarly community in peer reviewed journals with long wait lists and high measurable impact factors with global appeal. Try publishing books which foreground the western suburbs of Adelaide or schools located in an environmentally fragile bio-region of Australia! In a globalising,

managerialist standardised era the tendency is to background context. Such moves have never worked well for socio-economically disadvantaged students or their teachers.

In a worst case scenario, the time and space for teachers to educate ethically and innovatively, capitalising on the affordances of context and researching the effects of their work on different students, would disappear. Educational researchers need to continue to insist on the importance of context in educational reform efforts if we are to make even uncertain and tenuous progress towards social justice.

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