Chapter 9
Building New Social Movements: The Politics of Responsibility and Accountability in School-Community Relationships

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Abstract This chapter provides both a response to Reid's chapter "Public diversity; private disadvantage: schooling and ethnicity" and an extension of the discussion to explore the relationship between schools and the communities they serve. Particularly focused on schools in low socio-economic contexts, the chapter will reflect on issues of diversity and disadvantage by drawing on data from a research project investigating the importance of teachers researching their communities. Drawing on this data and the heretical discussions presented by Reid, this chapter will challenge generally accepted notions of parental involvement in schools, schools' understandings of, and attitudes towards the communities they serve, and the extent to which policies and movements, such as school choice, shape current school-community relationships.

This response to Reid's chapter *Public diversity; private disadvantage: schooling and ethnicity* has three aims. First and foremost, it provides a reaction to Reid's thought-provoking argument regarding a policy disjuncture in Australian schools. This policy disjuncture, argued by Reid, is brought about by the contradictions of an increased compulsory school age and neoliberal discourses of school 'choice', resulting in patterns of inequality and restricted options for those without access to governing social and cultural capital. Although much of Reid's discussion was focused on the school leaving age and its effects on schools in disadvantaged communities, I explore the ways in which this policy disjuncture affects the work of schools and teachers more generally, and the ways in which Reid's discussions align with recent work in school-community relationships (e.g., Freebody et al. 2011a). Second, this response presents a discussion regarding the position of education, and schools more specifically, in wider social movements that place local citizens and their needs at the centre of change. To do this, I draw on the heretical propositions Reid presented in her chapter and on the work of critical educational theorist

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Jean Anyon (2005). The overall purpose is to present a productive and positive way of viewing the relationship between schools, disadvantaged communities, and politics. Finally, in this response I present my own personal 'heresy' to challenge the education community. A heresy that invites us, as a community of educators (teachers, teacher trainers and school leaders, and others) to explore our own, sometimes uncomfortable, relationships with the systems in which we work.

Reid draws on the current government policies in Australia that increase the compulsory schooling age to illustrate a disjuncture between the needs of schools, communities, teachers and students and the current education policies and politics of school choice, principal autonomy, and funding. Her six heresies include:

1. that longer schooling is not necessarily better;
2. that more choice for parents is not necessarily better;
3. that greater school autonomy is not necessarily better;
4. that schools do not always provide ladders of opportunity;
5. that class is not dead; and
6. that education is not above politics.

These heretical statements have important implications for school-community relationships, responsibility, accountability, and the uncomfortable relationships between educa*tors* and educa*tion*.

Once such issue is that of education and the market place – Reid's second heresy that "parent choice is not necessarily better" draws on the work of Ball (2006), discussing his proposition that "placing the onus on parents to understand the education market and its reforms when they may be disadvantaged themselves through limited or different educational, cultural and linguistic capital, risks producing and reproducing social inequality". This points directly to a mechanism by which, when it comes to social inequality, schools have the potential to be part of the problem rather than the solution.

For those of us who came to understand education and its relationship to society through the work of Australian sociologist Connell and colleagues over the past three decades, the growing divide between the educated 'haves and have nots' is not new, not surprising, and disturbingly, not accidental. I remember reading the seminal text *Making the Difference* as an idealistic undergraduate teacher and being shocked by the authors' perception of the Australian education system:

> The simplest, and not the silliest, answer to the question 'why educational inequality?' is that the schools are designed to produce it. They are set up to 'sort and sift', to give elite training to the children of the rich, to prepare others for the assembly line, and to legitimate the results. That is why we have a testing programme, selective promotion of upper levels of education, privileged private schools, and so on. (Connell et al. 1982, p. 189)

Unfortunately, as someone who has worked in school and university education for over a decade, this sentiment no longer shocks me. Instead, I wonder if writing this today, the authors would have added individualisation, hyper-credentialising (Demerath et al. 2010) school choice (Campbell et al. 2009), and now an increase in compulsory schooling (Reid, this volume) to that list. Since writing these words, much of Connell and her colleagues' work has discussed the increasing class divide

in education and our normalisation of advantage in policy and general educational discourse (Connell et al. 1992). These ideas feed into what Reid referred to in her chapter as a policy disjuncture, "political decision-making that sits outside the radar of most students and their families". This disjuncture is around not just the practical issues of the school leaving age or school choice, but the more pervasive, entrenched issues of schooling, ethnicity, social class and social justice.

Although this disjuncture is at the centre of both Reid's chapter and my response, the intention of this discussion is to be positive and productive. Within teacher education, particularly as it relates to social justice and schooling, there is often a focus on what has gone wrong, rather than how it can be made right. This is potentially because the problems are too complex to find an easy, teachable, programmable, assessable solution. Or perhaps the term 'solution' is too closely tied in our minds to politics and policies. In Australian education it certainly seems to be getting harder to separate those two things. Therefore, rather than a 'solution', in this response I wish to present and idea; what Anyon (2005) refers to as a "radical possibility".

New Social Movements – Community and School Movement Building

Concern over the ability of schools to provide students with opportunities in communities where opportunities are scarce and the "infrastructure required to take advantage of opportunities is absent" comprises Reid's fourth Heresy. This concern acknowledges that 'educational opportunities' do not exist in a vacuum. Employment, transport, housing, entertainment, education, and other services are vital for communities to thrive. 'New social movements' (Anyon 2005) refer to community movement building that places school-community relationships as central change-makers. These movements acknowledge that schools and teachers often have access to a broad cross section of the community – children, parents, business, local community, local government and services, and so on. Teachers also have the ability to talk to and about both the local community and the broader bureaucracy. Within these movements there is a focus on improving communities, with schools and communities becoming advocates for each other, and together working towards more inclusive educational opportunities for young people.

This model of school-community engagement acknowledges that often factors limiting and distorting the relationships between schools and communities emanate from sources outside of both the school and the community. So, along with enhancing the educational experience of students, schools and communities that advocate for one another have the opportunity to reveal and challenge the external practices and policies that intensify disadvantage and exclusion. It is through the notion of relationship-as-alliance (Anyon 2005) that both schools and communities can move against forces that act against their interests.

Recent research exploring school-community relationships (Freebody et al. 2011a) found that for these new social movements to take place, educators need to become researchers of their communities; to explore and understand the political and cultural resources that can be called upon to help address the school's and community's problems, and to acknowledge that communities are not homogeneous or stable (Freebody et al. 2011b). Schools participating in the research found that researching their communities led to greater understanding of the needs of their students and their families, as well as a recognition that "community is broader than just parents, students and teachers: local businesses, places of worship, sporting clubs are all part of the wider concept of community" (Freebody et al. 2011a, p. 45). This broader view of community engagement is central to these new social movements, within which educational policies need to move beyond the school and educational bureaucracy and "must join the world of communities, families, and students; it must advocate for them and emerge from their urgent realities" (Anyon 2005, p. 199).

The idea of community building through school-community relationships may not seem like a heresy at all. In fact, many people working in education would probably agree with this sentiment. However, its enactments would challenge many ingrained perspectives and practices regarding school-community relationships in the current education system. As Reid pointed out in her sixth heresy – "education is not above politics"–notions of community building and reciprocal relationships between schools and communities do not always align with political decisions and popular public perceptions of education. Specifically, the idea of new social movements challenge:

- The way educators currently view who is serving whom in school-community relationships;
- How educators 'manage' these relationships;
- Who is responsible and accountable for this 'management'.

Who Is Serving Whom in School-Community Relationships

Discussions about school community relationships commonly position the community as servicing the school; for example as providing services which teachers can use, "allowing" parents to help, and so on. Central to Reid's 'Heresy no 2', however, is contemporary education policy discourses around parents and their 'freedom' to choose their child's school. One might think that this would drastically change current discourses around school-community relationships, however it actually appears to provide only a slight shift, and only for some people. Ball (2010) and others have shown that schools in the educational 'marketplace' promote their ability to serve *individual* students, rather than emphasising broader community obligations In any case, as Reid points out, this marketplace is small, with many families not in a position to make a meaningful choice. Those who *are* in a position

to choose, however, are potentially seen as more valuable to schools in terms of their forms of capital, and their ability to attract, in turn more of the 'right' kind of students. Thus we once again find ourselves focusing on ways community and families can be of service to (some) schools.

How We 'Manage' the Relationship, and Who Is Responsible

Questions about management and responsibility in school-community relationships become increasingly important as policy reforms in Australia and around the world focus more directly on the need for schools to develop strong links with local communities and for curriculum to be responsive to local knowledge and cultural practices. The introduction of policy that directs the ways schools interact with local communities leads to the question of responsibility. As they enact these policies, should schools orient to their responsibility to the school itself, to the local community, to the 'social movement', the students, or the parents? Or, does the 'mandated' nature of such policies require schools to acknowledge their responsibility to governments and funding bodies, both to demonstrate compliance and to justify their funding?

When policy becomes involved, and it becomes policy to engage with the community in a particular, regulated way, then a particular set of reasons for, and ways of, enacting such involvement arises. Regulation also calls into question educators' ability to advocate for a community in the way Anyon (2005) envisioned. When funding is determined by a schools' ability to meet large policy objectives, schools are necessarily placed in a difficult position if these generic policy initiatives do not adequately serve the needs of the local community, or if it unclear how they might meet these needs.

Who Is Responsible for Managing the Relationship?

This line of inquiry can be broadened to ask who is responsible for social disadvantage and its effects on schooling more broadly? In her chapter, Reid discusses the newspaper columnist Sheehan's (2012) assertion, and the public perception it reflects, that there is a "shift from teachers to parents as the source of inequitable outcomes in education", and how often this re-allocation has taken to surfacing in the debate surrounding class, ethnicity and schooling. This perception has implications for public understandings of responsibility and accountability in schools. The placing of responsibility on parents can be seen in public discourse, often clothed as a 'right' or a gesture of 'respect' for parents' choices (e.g., Garrett 2011). However it is arguable that the responsibility placed on parents does not actually shift accountability away from teachers, but rather serves mainly to deflect attention away from policy strategies that may leave inequitable outcomes in place,

or indeed intensify them. There is an increasingly powerful discourse that it is the quality of individual teachers' work that has the greatest influence on student outcomes. This discourse calls on a particular form of evidence to counteract any potential debate, and is expressed in words that rely on particularly careful interpretations. For example Australia's 'Smarter Schools National Partnership' policies (DEEWR n.d.) regarding teacher quality claim that 'quality' teaching has the ability to overcome disadvantage, and draw on educational psychologist Hattie's work to insist that "Teacher quality is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and outcomes" (Hattie 2003, cited in NSW National Partnerships n.d.). Research into schooling and social justice has consistently established that the greatest influence on student outcomes is socio-economic disadvantage, (Connell 1993; Lamb and Teese 2005; Masters and Forster 1997). The inclusion of the wording 'in-school' in the government's reasoning for the focus on teacher quality in recent policy statements (e.g., DEEWR n.d.) requires that the reader take it that social disadvantage, including class, ethnicity, and home language, are variables that are not relevant to the 'in-school' setting, a notion that might leave many teachers, at best, perplexed.

A recent analysis of the Australian federal National Partnerships policy and state Priority Schools Programs policies regarding education funding for social disadvantage (Krumin-Strauss 2011) found that the reports enshrined three 'solutions' to the problem of social disadvantage: teacher quality; transparency and accountability in school planning; and partnerships with parents and communities. There are two reasons this list is relevant to the current discussion. First, these solutions do not necessarily correspond rationally or obviously to how the two policy documents defined disadvantage. The issue of disadvantage was defined through understandings of access to community resources, cultural and linguistic difference, and wealth. Second, according to policy analyst Bacchi (2009), the ways in which solutions are presented in policy strongly presuppose a particular version of the 'key problem'. This placement of responsibility onto teachers and principals to solve problems of educational inequities indicates that the problem in disadvantaged schools is the lack of quality teachers and high performing principals (Krumin-Strauss 2011). This discourse was explicit in recent interviews with the current Australian Prime Minister discussing a national education review (Gonski 2011). Although most of the review focused on school funding, the Prime Minister's media responses were focused on the necessity for new measures to improve the quality of school teachers (e.g., Cullen 2012).

For some readers a discussion about how social movements (Anyon 2005) might have the ability to call into question our current views regarding school-community relationships may not seem heretical. My intention, however, is to expand on elements of Reid's heretical discussions around policies, politics, choice and opportunity, and to challenge contemporary 'ways of knowing' and managing education practice. Finally, I present one further 'heresy' about how effectively we as a community of educators manage the space between what we believe about schools and schooling, and how we act as educators. Put more bluntly, I assert

that sometimes our community does not effectively manage the space between our beliefs about what we do, and what we are actually able to do, in our professional practice. The heresy here is that we function, very effectively, within a system that does not necessarily align with our beliefs. Or, probably more fairly but also more damagingly, we function within a system that often uses our beliefs about what we do to manage politically popular but not necessarily educationally sound outcomes.

This is by no means a groundbreaking claim. Educators have often struggled with the differences between the good of the system and the good of the student (Illich 1971; Connell et al. 1982), As Anyon stated, "Governments and Corporate elites depend on education to deflect the pain inflicted by the economy" (2005, p. 199). Teachers potentially need to ask ourselves to what extent we participate in this deflection – to ask why we do it before we ask how well we do it. It is a difficult question for many, particularly when helping the young people in our classrooms requires a bit of deflection.

In the education community in Australia there is a popular divisive discourse: 'Us' the educators (teachers, teacher trainers, school leaders, etc.) – here because we believe in the importance of what we do, the value of education for a more socially just world, and 'Them' the system – the political, bureaucratic machinery through which the environments in which we work are controlled. It is obviously much more complex, and that very complexity enhances the durability of the oppositionality, so it is important to remain thoughtful, and perhaps a bit uncomfortable, about the place of that work and its inherent contradictions in a highly politicised and tightly bound education 'system'. Rather than make us depressed, this thoughtfulness must lead to a deeper attention to our work as advocates and change agents, and perhaps a renewed zest for the subversive possibilities of 'a good education'.

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