

Literacy Teacher Research in High-Poverty Schools: Why It Matters

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Abstract Teachers who work in contexts in which their students' lives are affected by poverty take up the challenge of learning to teach diverse students in ways that teachers in other contexts may not be required to do. And they do this work in contexts of immense change. Students' communities change, neighborhoods change, educational policies change, literate practices, and the specific effects of what it means to be poor in particular places also change. What cannot change is a commitment to high-equity, high-quality education for the students in these schools. Teachers need to analyze situations and make ongoing ethical decisions about pedagogy and curriculum. To do this, they must be able to continuously gauge the effects of their practices on different students. Hence, we argue that building teacher-researcher dispositions and repertoires is a key goal for teacher education across the teaching life-span. Drawing on a range of recent and ongoing collaborative research projects in schools situated in areas of high poverty, we draw out some principles for literacy teachers' education.

1 Introduction

A social justice stance in education is arguably more important now than ever before. Poverty in Western contexts, such as Australia, continues to have a tangible and enduring impact on the lives and educational opportunities of a significant proportion of our children. Some economists believe that our current economic context works to disadvantage the disadvantaged in new ways. Economist Thomas Piketty (2014) recently argued that

A market economy based on private property, if left to itself, contains powerful forces of convergence, associated with the diffusion of knowledge and skills; but also contains powerful forces of divergence, which are potentially threatening to democratic societies and to the values of social justice on which they are based. (p. 571)

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Because wealth distribution is occurring on a global scale, those who “own nothing but their labor” are increasingly susceptible to dominant entrepreneurs (Piketty 2014, p. 571). If Piketty is correct, then a recent OECD report indicating that growing numbers of people have “problems making ends meet” and that young and low-skilled workers are hardest hit and face long-term “scarring” effects, facing futures of diminished earnings and job prospects (OECD 2014, p. 9) is even more worrying. And this should be especially worrying for educators. Piketty (2014) argues that social scientists, activists, journalists, commentators, and, we would add, educational researchers, “should take a serious interest in money”. He reminds us that “Those who have a lot of it never fail to defend their interests. Refusing to deal with numbers rarely serves the interests of the least well-off” (Piketty 2014, p. 577). From our perspective this has significant implications for the kinds of knowledge teachers need about money and the distribution of material resources.

Until recently, debates about social justice could, and have, logically taken place within the various state borders in Australia. That is, as Fraser (2009) details, social justice could be “assumed to concern the relations among fellow citizens, to be subject to debate within national publics, and to contemplate redress by nation states” (p. 12). In such a context, social justice can be understood to require a redistribution of resources to ameliorate disadvantage. By this, we mean that the solution to disadvantage can be framed as being about shifting human, financial, spatial, and curriculum resources toward a more equitable distribution solution. While there are, no doubt, distributive elements to achieving a socially just education for all children, increasingly, educational researchers have come to understand that this will not be enough. Calls for education to be reformed through shifts to recognitive elements of curriculum, pedagogy, and access form the second arm of what is often called a two-dimensional model of social justice (Fraser 1997). These are calls for recognition of the cultures, languages, identities, values, needs, and ideological stances of a wider community base to be not only included in the curriculum, but also to be visible and core (Woods et al. 2014).

However, in the shifting global economic state, as described by economists such as Piketty, there are signs that these two-dimensional understandings of social justice are also no longer enough. The redistributive claims of what and how resources should be shared and the recognitive claims of “what constitutes equal respect and which kinds of differences merit public recognition” (Fraser 2009, p. 35) remain paramount to our understandings of social justice; however, they are no longer the only elements that need consideration. In considering what Fraser (2003, 2009) has called representative justice, the political becomes apparent alongside of the economic and cultural. By expanding our understandings of justice in this way, Fraser (2009) reminds us to consider not only what social justice should look like and who might have legitimate claims for it, but also how it might be progressed.

In this chapter, we attempt to heed these warnings in thinking about what a socially just education can—or perhaps even should—look like in current times, and to consider what elements of social justice should form the basis of a principled teacher education. Used as frequently as they are in education and schools, and in the politics around education, the terms social justice and equity are at risk of meaning everything and nothing. Here we use the terms to describe practices put in

place to create educational systems that challenge established inequities in institutions and the social relationships within these institutions (Hyttén and Bettez 2011). In more practical terms, at its very core, providing a socially just education requires a focus on providing “parity of participation” (Fraser 2009, p. 36). Amongst the calls for a more highly defined curriculum, the continued focus on accountability as testing (Woods 2007) and education funding cuts within already inequitable resourcing models, we believe it is important to ask what such a context means for equity in education, or for access to quality education for everyone’s children. We are suggesting that there is a heightened need for teachers to take an active stance as researchers of teaching practice in order to address changing contemporary challenges. And as we think about fostering teacher-researchers dispositions, it becomes apparent that understandings of social justice, cultural knowledges, and critical discourse analysis, among other things, remain necessary, but perhaps are no longer sufficient for these times. Teachers also need to be statistically and economically knowledgeable. In other words, a teacher-researcher disposition requires complex educational capital. Graduate teachers need to understand three important things: how poverty and injustice are produced; the material effects of poverty on daily life and the capacity to benefit from education; and how education can be complicit in maintaining societal inequities. While we believe that this may be especially important for teachers working in schools located in high-poverty communities, it is not only important for these teachers. In education, social justice and effective ways of working with diversity are everybody’s business. This is especially the case during periods of government stress on accountability measures and the reduction of educational resources.

There is a danger, as Lipman (2013) notes, that current government policies that emphasize performance on high-stakes testing will have significant and long-term effects in schools serving the poor:

Undermining teaching as a profession and breaking teacher seniority will certainly ensure the acceleration of teacher turnover in the least resourced and most test-driven schools. A revolving door of short-term, untrained novices supplied by privately run ‘alternative certification’ operations will constitute the staffs of the most desperate schools or schooling will be outsourced to private providers of online learning or learning modules synched to high stakes tests. (p. 566)

Such trends are seriously troubling and may lead to a situation where some school students will in all likelihood only be exposed to minimum educational standards, while others will access wider educational repertoires. This may be through advantaged schooling systems or the capacities of their families and communities. Such incongruence sets the stage for increased inequity in schooling and the future lives of students. The consequences of inadequately prepared teachers will have more impact in school communities addressing the challenges of poverty and further exacerbate educational disadvantage. As teacher educators, this means that our work must center on the deliberate preparation of teacher graduates to work for the everyday complexities they face in terms of the specific dangers of global changes and policy effects for their student cohorts. Recent research in Australia suggests that teachers may not have the knowledge of social justice, literacy pedagogies, and diverse cultures required to work in equitable ways in “other people’s” (Delpit

1988) communities, including, for example, non-Indigenous teachers working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people (see, for example, Cazden 2012; Luke et al. 2013). Providing socially just educational pathways for the students with whom they work requires teachers to focus on literacy pedagogy and curriculum, preparing students for full citizenship, and providing spaces where the well-being of students is foregrounded (Woods 2009, 2012). Teachers' professional dispositions and educational capital must include not only the capacity for designing and enacting high expectations, and engaging curriculum in their own classrooms, but also taking positions of influence among teacher colleagues in the local and the broader educational field. They need to understand the politics and economics of educational policy and practice: how the numbers make a difference to the educational resources available to their students. They need to deal effectively with change, and take opportunities to seek collaborative learning relationships with other teachers and researchers.

As the contemporary world continues to change rapidly in terms of digital and communication technologies, the global circulation of economic capital and populations, teachers, and indeed schools, will need significant and changing educational capital (Marjoribanks 2002) and that capital will need to grow throughout teaching careers (Cochran-Smith 2011, 2012; Nixon et al. 2012). This means that graduates must be open to learning about everything; however, for our purposes here, graduates must be open to undertaking ongoing analysis of the questions concerning what constitutes *literacy*, *social justice*, and *poverty*, and how these concepts relate to each other. They will need to understand *big data* because it appears that, increasingly, statistics rule. They will need to be fearless as they face situations in which knowledge about their work is increasingly produced through interpretation of data, that is undertaken elsewhere, beyond the classroom, beyond the school, even beyond the state.

In what follows, we briefly introduce related work concerning literacy teachers as researchers. We then examine one case study of a teacher who developed relationships with researchers over an extended period of time as the impetus for reflexive pedagogical practice. This teacher demonstrates that working in a context that pushed for a focus on tests and highly defined curriculum was not necessarily the end to considering a broad socially just curriculum for her 4- and 5-year-old students who were attending their first year of school. Next, we move to an ongoing study to highlight some of the emergent challenges that affect teachers' work in high-poverty school contexts. We conclude by reiterating key principles of teacher education practice for fostering teacher-researcher dispositions and why they matter.

2 Literacy Teachers as Researchers

Literacy, and the best way to teach it, has always been the subject of hot debate and extensive and intensive international research efforts on various scales. Research in literacy education also has a long history of teacher inquiry. Perhaps it is because

literacy is so central to the work of schooling, to inducting children into the processes of becoming students, especially in elementary schooling, that practitioners have engaged in their own research driven by the goal of making a positive difference to all their students. Traditionally, such work has strong connections with education for social justice because the task of achieving standard English academic literate performances can be more challenging in communities that are poor and linguistically and culturally diverse (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Hence, teacher research in literacy education has a long history of working in the interests of diverse students and contesting deficit discourses and pedagogies of poverty (Comber and Kamler 2004).

Yet, for all the teacher research activity in study groups and colleges of education—in masters and doctoral programs for example—it is probably fair to say that teacher research, in terms of its impact and take-up by educational researchers and policy-makers, is frequently minimal. In other words, it has tended to work only at the local level. There are exceptions, of course. The work of Vivian Vasquez as an early childhood teacher in critical literacy and the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle with teacher-researchers has received significant and welcome attention. However, it may be that the most powerful impact of teacher research is not what is visible in academic citations or policy take-up, but what it engenders in classroom, school, and community practice; that is, what engaging in teacher research does in terms of the long-term impact on teacher knowledge and practice is what matters most. What educational capital, dispositions, ways of thinking, and cultural practices are fostered by undertaking teacher research and what might be the effects beyond the life of the project? Are early career teachers able to use what they learn through teacher research, and what they come to know and believe about social justice and diversity, in the face of increasing standardization in educational policy (Dover 2013)?

In working with teacher-researchers over several decades on projects particularly concerned with literacy and social justice, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) have developed the concept of *inquiry as stance*. We believe this is a critical graduate attribute for those who will teach. The term was originally conceived in the 1990s, but more recently Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explained it as follows:

To say that we regard inquiry as a stance is to suggest that we see this as a worldview and a habit of mind—a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo. (p. viii)

They go to explain that their practitioner-inquiry approach is not simply about teacher development, but has a much larger social and political agenda. Very much informed by Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) work, and also that of Bourdieu (1998), Comber (2006) considered the educational habitus and dispositions of three teacher-researchers who worked explicitly for social justice in designing and enacting their literacy curriculum. Like Cochran-Smith (2011, 2012), Comber (2006) argues that teachers assemble theoretical repertoires and discursive resources across

their careers, necessarily so, but she also identified teachers' dispositions towards social justice and towards inquiry as fundamental factors in the learning process. In addition, each teacher's own political stances towards class, race, and gender were catalytic in their engagement with theorizations of equity, education, and critical literacy. In this chapter, we reiterate the importance of these conditions for literacy teacher-researchers to conduct inquiries that count in high-poverty schools, and we update the material challenges of such work in an increasingly globalized policy landscape where what counts as justice in literacy education needs constant scrutiny (Fraser 2008; Woods et al. 2014).

Next, we examine how one teacher, through long-term engagement in collaborative research, changed her understandings of literacy and her pedagogical practices, and also expanded her circle of influence beyond the classroom.

2.1 Becoming a Teacher-Researcher in the Context of School Reform

Across numerous collaborative research projects in high-poverty communities, we have engaged with teachers who have impressed us with their dedication and professionalism in relation to teaching students. However, at least some of these teachers have also provided us with insights into what it takes to become a teacher-researcher: to not only be open to learning new things and to sharing these new learnings and understandings with colleagues, but to take a researcher's eye to the practice of teaching. This is what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) call an inquiry stance. The data used in this case study was collected as part of a 5-year school-reform project that involved teachers, the teachers' union, researchers, students, their families, and their communities working together to reform literacy for improved outcomes in high-poverty and culturally diverse schools.¹ A basic assumption of this study was that to achieve long-term sustained improvements in literacy teaching would require a knowledgeable, flexible teaching force. For this reason, we did not arrive at the school with an intervention. Instead, we explained to the leadership team and teachers that we were committed to collaborative research partnerships over a period of 4 or 5 years. This, we suggested, was a way to study what effective literacy teaching for schools in high-poverty and culturally diverse communities could look like if equitable access and improved literacy outcomes were the focus of change.

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Pam was a Preparatory (Prep) teacher at the school who had recently returned to work part-time after a period of maternity leave. The Prep year remains a non-compulsory school year in Queensland; however, most children attend, and do so in the year that they turn five.² The school was a mid-sized state school located in an urban area where poverty and lack of resources affected the daily lives of many of the students who attended. There was a large cohort (10–15 %) of students who identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people and a further 15 % of students who were of Pacific Islander backgrounds. There had recently been an influx of students who had arrived in Australia under a variety of temporary or refugee visas. Children who attended had either been born, or their parents had been born, in 31 different countries, so cultural diversity was tangible. The teaching staff were a combination of those who had taught at this school for many years, at least some of whom lived locally, and a cohort of young, recently graduated teachers on short-term contracts.

The research project offered the opportunity for teachers at the school to come together to discuss their teaching practice, and to audit practices across the school (see Luke et al. 2011 for an explanation of this process). These whole-school sessions were paired with smaller, tailor-made professional development sessions for groups of teachers in different school sectors. For the Prep-3 teachers, these just-in-time, small-scale training sessions took the form of a teachers' research group. The idea behind this group was to provide a space for teachers to drive professional learning activities as they worked to reform literacy pedagogy in their classrooms. The research group engaged in collaborative learning through seminar-style sessions, design experiments in which teachers and researchers worked alongside each other in the classrooms, and report-back sessions in which peers provided feedback on each other's thinking and practice. Despite the best of intentions of everyone involved—teachers and researchers—the research group had mixed results. Many of the teachers were less enthusiastic about being involved in planning and implementing research of their practice than they were of being involved in more traditional forms of professional development. However, Pam took up the opportunities offered with a great deal of enthusiasm and confidence. And so began a shift in her disposition as a teacher.

The context of Prep in Queensland during this time was shifting. Previously governed by the state-designed Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Queensland Studies Authority 2006), which was an interdisciplinary approach to this first year of school, the introduction of a national curriculum across all state systems in Australia had seen moves to bring the Queensland Prep year under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum Foundation Year. This resulted in the provision of discipline-based curriculum documents (English, math, science, and history in the first stage) for the first time in this early years education context. The Queensland

²The full-time non-compulsory Preparatory year replaced state-funded preschool programs in 2007. At this time, children attended in the year in which they turned five. In 2008 the school starting age was adjusted so that children must turn five by June 30 in order to attend the Preparatory year.

state education system's answer to the Australian Curriculum more generally was to provide teachers with highly defined, scripted unit plans for use as their curriculum. Eventually the use of these plans was made optional, but at their inception, the units were mandatory in content, timing, and sequence. The resultant changes to the Prep year are indicative of the more general and enduring push down of primary curriculum into early childhood education (see Hard and O'Gorman 2007). Around the same time, national tests in literacy and numeracy had been introduced in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 in Australia, increasing the pressures of accountability as testing (Luke and Woods 2009; Woods 2007).

Pam's answer to the question asked by the reform project—that is, if in the current policy environment it was possible to rely on teacher professionalism as a reform lever—was first to focus on shifting her own pedagogy. Her reported feeling was that as she had moved to formalize her approach in the push to ensure that Prep was *more like school*, she may have become too rigid in her planning and routines. She reported feeling like she had lost play in her curriculum, and she and her Prep colleagues expressed concern that the implementation of the new Australian Curriculum would hasten this shift to a more traditional pedagogical style in their Prep classrooms. As a group, we analyzed the draft foundation year Australian Curriculum in mathematics and English, and compared this to the current plans that the teachers were working from.³ The teachers considered what changes to their pedagogical approach would be enabled through the implementation of the new curriculum and how these changes might be framed to ensure positive implications for their students. These productive sessions were followed by subsequent collaborative planning sessions in which the teachers worked together to ensure some consistency of expectations across the four Prep classes.

After her involvement in these professional learning events, Pam made plans to continue to collaborate with the researchers. The class included a cohort of diverse children and a full range of abilities and needs. Many of the children and their families dealt with issues related to poverty. To begin with, the researchers provided advice about shared and modeled teaching, and supported Pam's planning. The process here was to enable reflection on the pedagogical decisions being made. The initial focus was literacy pedagogy generally, but quickly Pam moved to focus on the specifics of grouping in the classroom routines.

Pam's usual practice had been to place students in ability groups as a way to deal with the diverse levels of ability, behavior, and social skills of the class. This organization allowed for additional adult supervision in the form of teacher aides to be placed around those children who were considered less able, and there had been a general assumption that children who were more ready to learn would have greater opportunity to do so if working together with like children. The school day was scheduled into numerous short bursts of activity. Students moved from whole groups

³These plans had been based on the Queensland Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (Queensland Studies Authority 2006), which had governed the Preparatory year until the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

to small groups regularly—at times with only 10 min planned for each activity. This was based on an assumption that behavior would be harder to manage if children were expected to work for longer periods of time. In our discussions, we began to query the equity of streaming, of what was on offer in the classroom to those children who were streamed in lower ability (or behavior) groups, how this might be affecting their current engagement, and what implications it would have for future schooling and beyond. The processes of grouping in the classroom became more flexible, and Pam considered supports that could be placed around students that would enable higher order engagement in substantive content for more of the children in the class. The daily timetable morphed to provide larger blocks of time in which these young students worked on more substantive projects.

This shift in considering the students as capable of working independently and the importance of weaving knowledge (Kwek 2012) from lesson to lesson and from the students' outside school lives to class activities, coincided with a professional learning move by our research team with school staff generally (see Luke et al. 2011). We presented data to the teachers that demonstrated that the students were generally achieving outcomes in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, but when there was a problem of poor outcomes, it related to comprehension, critical thinking, the use of a meta-language, and the uptake of discipline-based vocabulary and concepts. Pam started to read and research herself, relying less and less on weekly visits by researchers to her room. She began to read research, and think about its place in her learning and the learning of her students, and to email researchers about her reading and thinking. This is an example of one such email from July 2012:

On another topic, I have been reading *The Cafe Book* by Gail Boushey and Joan Moser⁴. I am intrigued by their literacy block structure, especially their move away from guided reading groups to strategy groups. These are flexible groups—something I have been keen to do effectively since I first heard Annette mention it some time ago. Much of their work speaks to all the things I love, for example, having an elbow buddy to turn and talk to, clearly identifying the purpose of the session, reflecting on this at the end, whole/small group/partner/individual work, teaching explicitly, setting personal goals, using the gradual release model and my favourite (because I am a big believer), each student doesn't require the same amount of our instructional time.

If all goes well, I'm thinking about trialing it in my room. Annette, I have been thinking about you and the lecture I am to do for you later. If it is late in the term, I might be able to speak to this research and how it works in my room, assuming it does. Also, how it fits with ACARA⁵ I guess.

Keen to hear your thoughts
Pam

The communication above provides insight into several new ways of being that Pam had begun to take on through the collaborative research process. Not only was she researching and reading material to ensure her pedagogical decisions were

⁴The *Cafe Approach* mentioned by Pam is taken from Boushey, G. & Moser, J. (2009). *The CAFE book: Engaging all students in daily literacy assessment and instruction*.

⁵ACARA is an acronym for the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority who are tasked with writing the new Australian Curriculum, however the term ACARA is often used by teachers and other to label the Australian Curriculum. This is how Pam has used the term here.

informed, she was taking up the call from school leadership to provide support to other teachers at the school, and she had also begun to think about her positioning as an expert practitioner in the field. The lecture she mentioned was a planned lecture at a teacher-education institute, and note how Pam discussed presenting research conducted in her own classroom to the institute's students. Also evident in the email communication is Pam's thinking about instruction that provides access to all students.

Pam had shifted from an inward reform focus on her own pedagogy and interactions with children, toward taking a position of authority among her colleagues; her influence, backed as it was by research, a defined language, and some evidence of practice, started to become useful to others. She worked with researchers to publish, she presented at several conferences, including showcases designed to disseminate findings from the school reform project based at the school. At the same time, she began running professional development sessions for other staff at the school, was nominated by her peers for a regional teaching award, and set up a Digital Café for other teachers at the school to open a space for teachers to discuss the use of digital technology in their classrooms and how this might provide access to learning for a broader range of students. Eventually, she also started a reading group for other teachers at the school.

During 2012, Pam engaged in several design experiments with different members of the research team. The focus of each design experiment was on considering access. For example, the introduction of digital technology in the form of laptops and iPads provided a space to consider how to organize classroom routines to enable access to multimodal texts, and to digital literacy comprehension *and* design skills to all children in the class. All of the students used the technology to complete complex tasks. So technology was not constructed as being only for those students who finished tasks quickly, as is so often the case in early years classrooms. As the children were called on to represent their opinions and ideas, those who had in the past struggled to articulate opinions in print, worked with images and video, voice recordings, and applications such as book creators to present ideas in ways that had not previously been available to them.

In answer to our research team's calls for substantive content for all students regardless of their literacy levels, Pam eventually decided to tackle the introduction of critical literacy to the literacy curriculum of the classroom. We discussed the equity of ensuring that the children in her classroom had access to higher order content, but also spaces to learn to discuss and debate, and form and justify opinions. We considered the urgency of this for children growing up in communities that were largely inaudible in mainstream decision-making systems. Pam worked with two researchers to design three design experiments, each trialing a different approach to engaging the students in critical substantive content, within a unit on fairytales that had already been agreed to by all of the Prep teachers at the school (for more detail about the design experiments discussed here, see Exley et al. 2014). The idea was to attempt to bring a critical edge to what had, in the past, been a progressive approach to an unchallenged view of the early childhood canon. In one of

the experiments, children were asked to consider which of a motley crew of fairytale and nursery rhyme characters were most deserving of a cake after reading *Into the forest* (Browne 2005). The children were provided with time to discuss their opinions and come to a consensus before producing a shared poster to advertise not only who would be provided with sustenance, but why. The discussions included issues of sharing with others more needy than you, even if you don't have much, looking after your own family before other people, helping hungry people first, the importance of sharing resources between everyone, and what being pretty allowed you to expect. Children and adults had a space to take up Piketty's (2014) call to become interested in money—or interested in cake, at least.

Pam planned and conducted professional development sessions for other staff members based on these lessons taught in her classroom. An extract from a flier advertising one of these sessions in 2013 provides evidence for the shifts to Pam's ways of thinking about literacy, and about her students:

Teaching kids to think critically is something we can achieve even in the Prep year. I am really keen to facilitate this in reading groups. Students become exposed to the thought processes of their peers, understanding there are multiple perspectives on any given topic or situation—not just one right way to think.

This case provides us with a conceptual understanding of teachers' work in communities where poverty affects the lives of students, and the importance of basing reform on the informed professionalism of teachers. The impetus for Pam's reflexive practice was change in the context in which she was teaching. The expectation that she engage as a generalist primary teacher within the changing context of early years schooling in Queensland stimulated her need to learn and reflect on her current teaching practice. Pam considered redistributive justice as she reallocated resources in new ways, moving from streaming to a focus on how best to support all students in the classroom. However, she also engaged in practices to ensure that children's life world experiences, opinions, and ideals were core to the curriculum and achieved this in a context that was being affected by higher levels of control from top-down pressures, and in a community where diversity and disadvantage was tangible and visible. The pedagogical interactions required for teaching and learning effectively in this context, as a way to provide equitable access to quality education for all of her students, were at the forefront of Pam's work; however, she also took opportunities to influence the work of other teachers in the local context and beyond. Pam's fields of influence became outward-looking and configured across national and generational contexts. Her stance as a teacher saw her positioned as a researcher. Yet Pam's experience in becoming a teacher-researcher may be increasingly hard to accomplish in schools situated in high poverty areas as the focus of teacher professional learning shifts more to performative accountability requirements in many such contexts (Comber 2012). In this policy milieu, we highlight the urgency of fostering socially critical teacher-researcher dispositions and repertoires, such as those achieved by teachers like Pam.

2.2 *New Challenges for New Teachers in New Poverty*

The problems related to providing equitable access to quality education for children and youth growing up in communities of high poverty are not the concern of individual teachers alone. Rather these are also problems for governments to address through improvements to teacher education over time, both pre-service and in-service. Currently, we are observing teachers in their first years of the profession who are working in primary schools located in high-poverty, culturally diverse locations. System policies mean that these *new* teachers are mostly appointed on short-term contracts of a year or even less. As the most industrially disadvantaged group within the teaching profession, these teachers often find work in schools that are hard to staff and where student performance on national tests of literacy and numeracy is well below the state and national average. More than ever, these teachers need to understand the socio-cultural context of the wider neighborhood community and to have access to theories and practices of literacy and pedagogy that allow them to imagine and design engaging and enabling curriculum for their students. They need to build reciprocal and respectful relationships with their students' families. They also need to understand that unemployment is rising as a result of changes to the economy, particularly as factories shut down and industries relocate off-shore where wages are lower. Yet increasingly, they are working in contexts where there is increasing pressure to deliver a standardized program to prepare students for the tests. The side-effects of such limited educational policy is beginning to play out in worrying trends in our recent observations.

In a range of schools, in different states of Australia, we have observed that practices encouraging student compliance seem to be prolific. This may not be surprising given the corresponding emphasis on teacher compliance brought about by mandated tests (Comber 2012). What do we mean by practices encouraging student compliance in literacy lessons? Such practices may include copying, coloring in, and recitation. Copying might be done in a scrapbook, on a worksheet, or from a whiteboard to an exercise book. New and old forms of technology are employed in these fill-the-time and fill-the-books kinds of practices. Those students who resist are offered up for intervention or expulsion by behavioral management programs and withdrawal programs with neat labels and simplistic pathologies. We have seen some teachers attempt to increase student motivation to complete more of this kind of work through technology that encourages competition, for example, introducing timers; others have used elaborate points systems and rewards. In terms of literacy, we have watched as children copied what was written on the whiteboard, blackboard, electronic flash card, or worksheets. With regard to recitation, children repeat sounds, words, and sentences, either in response to a prompt from the teacher or, in a benign attempt to introduce digital technology to the classroom program, in response to a computer program or smart technology application (such as phonics drill games). We are not suggesting that there is never a place for repetition or practice of low-level skills that children have already achieved. However, our observations across a range of classrooms suggest a number of troubling issues with the volume, purpose, and foregrounding of such practices.

Here, we describe these practices as *fickle literacies*: that is, literacies that make it look like productive work is occurring, but that result in limited learning being accomplished. There is often little opposition from children to these practices because they require little effort and provide a space for them to achieve their own ends while keeping the teacher happy. For example, often children are free to chat quietly as they go about such tasks. The cognitive load and challenge is low, so chatting about unrelated things is unlikely to have an impact on the completion of the task. At one level, such tasks are quite relaxing. Clearly, the major issue with such classroom tasks is that they are much less than children deserve. A diet of low-expectations curriculum leads to little learning of value. So such an approach is unlikely to accomplish fairness on any grounds. Let us review three recent problems that we have noted.

1. When all children are asked to copy or color or fill in the blanks on the same task in any classroom, the activities are too easy for some children and probably too hard for many. We have watched some children zoom through such tasks without any apparent challenge while their peers struggle to copy the words letter by letter. The futility of doing a task that is either far too easy, or far too hard, encourages a focus on completion of the technical aspects at best, rather than on quality of the outcome achieved. Additionally, in effect, the children are being asked to do a different task dependent on their competence with the skills required, but with no pay-off for children at either end of the ability continuum.
2. Sometimes different worksheets are allocated to different ability groups on the grounds that teachers are differentiating the curriculum; the teacher then has time to work with a small group more intensively and to provide direct instruction to that group. The children who are supposed to be working *independently* are often off task, not progressing through the task, or not understanding what is required. The common solution to this seems to be to make the independent task easier, so that everyone can be expected to work without the need for adult supervision. We would suggest that more challenging substantive tasks might be an alternative solution.
3. Such busy-work can be done with little or no engagement in the literacy learning goal. When the time is up, children are asked to stick the worksheet in their books and/or to show the teacher what they have completed. There is rarely time for feedback on the essential literacy elements to the task, so again, the instrumental elements of handwriting, putting something in all available spaces, and presentation become the criteria for quality.

None of these criticisms are new. They resonate with what Martin Haberman (1991) identified several decades ago as the “pedagogy of poverty.” What is worrying is that they are still so dominant and often appear under the guise of contemporary approaches such as explicit teaching or differentiated curriculum. We use the term *fickle literacies* to name them because they do not offer students anything substantive or intellectually rich. They are about the surface appearance of working with text and the technologies of literacy at best, and at worst, the appearance of *doing* school. Indeed, when Haberman (2010) revisited his earlier work a few years ago he reiterated the problem:

It is a source of consternation that I am able to state without equivocation that the overly directive, mind-numbing, mundane, useless, anti-intellectual acts that constitute teaching not only remain the coin of the realm but have become the gold standard. (p. 45)

Disturbingly, we are now witnessing a similar trend in Australia. The lack of intellectual demand in the literacy tasks not only results in a lack of serious engagement, but it also means that these students are not being inducted into academic discursive practices and ways of knowing on which their later educational success will depend (Comber and Nixon 2011; Luke et al. 2011). Teachers are overwhelmingly concerned with student behavior, with keeping students busy and sitting at desks, and with preparing students for tests. Among all of this, it is important not to dismiss the very real challenges these teachers are facing, so that we can think about what it is they need to know, and be able to do, to teach well. On a recent visit to a school, just as we were getting ready to leave near the end of the school day, we watched as the principal and two colleagues carried a screaming and squirming child of about 7 or 8 years old to a car so that he might be taken home. We had previously seen this child in the office shouting a range of verbal abuse into the corridor and banging loudly and incessantly on the door. That same week, and on other occasions, we had seen other similar instances of highly distressed and angry children, many of them as young as five or six, who had been sent to the administration area due to various misdemeanors committed in the classroom or in the playground. These often involved violence or threats of violence, against peers, and sometimes even adults and teachers. Some of the children are of course living in situations in which they witness verbal, physical, and psychological abuse or are subjected to it themselves. Their families are likely under extreme stress from unemployment, family breakdown, and the effects of mental and physical illnesses and so on. These conditions are the everyday embodied material effects of poverty, and they are being played out in the school lives of children and their teachers.

Despite these demands, and the related and understandable priority to keep the children calm and relatively quiet, some teachers in these same schools do manage to design, negotiate, and enact complex, intellectually demanding, high-expectations curriculum (Dudley-Marling and Michaels 2012). What is it that they know and understand and can do that allows them to accomplish complex and enabling literacy pedagogies in the face of similar behavioral challenges from their students? What supports them to do their work in this way and what are the implications for other teachers? In one such school we worked in, the principal appointed a former teacher, Lena, with excellent expertise in literacy pedagogy as an assistant principal with the brief of *literacy improvement*. As a teacher in the school, she enjoyed high credibility with staff and students in terms of her effectiveness with challenging and struggling students, as well as extending high-achieving students. Importantly, from our perspective, Lena was very open to learning and constantly on the look-out for expanding her own repertoires of practice. Like Pam, Lena exemplified an *inquiry as stance* disposition in her approach to student learning, demonstrating persistent curiosity in considering how individual children were developing and making sense from texts.

This school was faced with the national, state, and regional emphases of lifting children's performance on the standardized annual literacy and numeracy tests, a high turnover of teachers, and increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities and behavioral concerns; therefore, it took on a common balanced approach to teaching literacy and a dedicated 2 h literacy block in the first period of the school day. In addition, each teacher was involved in the continuous collecting of assessment data and setting literacy and numeracy targets for children. All of this is very familiar: the insistence on mandated literacy assessments and the relentless collection of data (Comber 2012). However, Lena instituted a set of practices that altered the predictability of the usual accountability regimes. She set up a series of regular one-to-one *literacy chats* in which individual teachers could discuss their successes and challenges with her. They were invited to bring to the meeting their most recent literacy data, in whatever form they chose, about just a few of their students. At the meetings, Lena asked the teachers to describe what was going well in their literacy lessons and to discuss any questions or problems they were facing, as well as to show and explain their student data. Lena did not have a performance management role; the teachers were *free* to speak openly and honestly about their practices, and they did. They explained what they had not been able to do in terms of enacting the literacy agreements. They talked about their frustrations when everything they had tried appeared to be making no difference for particular students. Lena, for her part, also made comments about any positive trends in the data, things she had noticed when she had dropped in to their classrooms, highlighting when the teachers seemed to be doing well, for example, when a child was now attending, when another volunteered to read, when another had not been sent to the office for a whole week.

The point to note here is that Lena gave teachers permission not to know, not to be doing everything correctly, not to be making continuous progress, not to have the perfectly managed class. She fostered educative inquiry spaces: sites for exploratory discourse. These educative spaces allowed teachers to consider student data without being defensive. Lena offered different ways of interpreting what was going on and strategies for teachers to try out with particular students. It was a diagnostic forum where together the teachers and Lena interpreted what was going on with different students' reading, writing, spelling, phonemic awareness, behavior, and so on. Lena brought her years of successful teaching in the school community to bear on the problems teachers brought to the table. She also ensured that teachers left her office with positive feedback on specific aspects of their practice, questions for further investigation, and practices or refinements to existing practices to try out. Critically reflective practice was encouraged.

Lena's practice did not immediately provide solutions to the challenges teachers faced, but it sent several strong messages to the teaching community:

- that teaching was complex work and required persistence and experimentation
- that there was an expectation that teachers would know individual students and how they were developing as learners
- that teachers' professional learning was a high priority for the leadership team.

The likelihood that teachers will develop an inquiry as stance disposition is enhanced by regular no-risk literacy chats. Explicitly adding professional reading, time to closely observe children and other teachers in various contexts, and openness to inquiries in and with the local community would add to this emerging critical and collaborative professional learning community.

3 Conclusions: Turn-Around Pedagogies

Our interest is in understanding how all teachers might acquire the capacities to teach well—ethically, imaginatively, and ambitiously—in the face of classrooms comprising highly diverse students with very different histories, lives, resources, and literate repertoires. In earlier work, we have experimented with generative vocabularies for getting out of deficit (Comber and Kamler 2004)—“funds of knowledge” (Moll et al. 1992), “virtual school bags” (Thomson 2002), “permeable curriculum” (Dyson 1993), “resourceful families” (McNaughton 2002), and taking “a different lens” (Henderson 2004; Henderson and Woods 2012); in other words, we have encouraged teachers to change their ways of thinking and understanding student experience, knowledges, and capabilities. We have worked to support teachers to become knowledgeable about what children bring to the classroom—to conduct research with parents, students and the wider community, rather than assuming they know *these kids* because they know *that kid*. From there, we have, with colleagues, developed the notion of turn-around pedagogies (Comber and Kamler 2005)—pedagogies designed on the basis of university researchers turning to school-based educators, and teachers turning to other teachers, university researchers, children, families, and theories. In this approach, knowledge is built collaboratively and reciprocally. Children and families are positioned as knowledgeable, resourceful, and resilient, as key informants for teachers to listen to and learn from and with.

Theory is not seen as the province of universities, but as offering helpful and enabling interpretive resources that open up possibilities. For example, teacher-researchers we have collaborated with have found theories, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, critical literacy, multiliteracies, and many other perspectives, as useful heuristics for designing their curriculum, a curriculum that can go so far beyond the straightjacket of a highly defined program. Sociological approaches to understanding an area and its history have also proven useful. Through such approaches, teachers come to understand that unemployment is not a choice, nor about individual characteristics, that poverty is produced, and not by those who suffer its consequences. By identifying key knowledges, dispositions, and principles that enable teachers to negotiate and sustain positive learning relationships with children, and their families and communities, we can think about how in the contemporary educational landscape schools, universities, and communities might work together to provide ongoing opportunities for teacher and student learning. This will entail building more complex understandings of the ways in which poverty and related educational disadvantaged is produced and sustained.

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