Chapter 28
School Leadership, Literacy and Social Justice: The Place of Local School Curriculum Planning and Reform

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Much of the North American debate over literacy and social justice has been dominated by the state and regional implementation of centralised curriculum programmes via *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* legislation. Yet a decade into this approach to 'closing the gap' in linguistic/cultural minority and working class schools, there is ample evidence that centralised curriculum dictates and neoliberal accountability measures have had at best mixed results and indeed in many instances negative effects (e.g. Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Luke & Woods, 2009). The school reform literature paints a very different picture, showing that school leadership with a strong focus on curriculum and pedagogy can generate sustainable gains on conventional indicators by students from linguistic/cultural minority and working class backgrounds (e.g. Newmann & Associates, 1996; Ladwig & Gore, 2005). This chapter reviews current work we are undertaking in Queensland, Australia, where some school communities are developing and implementing school-based whole-school literacy programmes. We document the response of one school community to test-driven accountability pressures. In the approach described here, teachers and researchers worked with the 'four resources model' of literacy (Freebody & Luke, 1990), 'multiliteracies' and digital and media arts pedagogies (New London Group, 1996) while building substantive links to community knowledge, locally relevant Indigenous knowledge and traditional school subject knowledge.

School reform is a matter of both redistributive social justice and recognitive social justice. Following the work of philosopher Nancy Fraser (1997), we begin from a philosophical and political commitment to the more equitable redistribution of resources, knowledge, credentials and access to educational pathways for students from linguistic/cultural minority and working class backgrounds. The community we describe here is one where access, achievement and participation have historically

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I. Bogotch and C.M. Shields (eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In)Justice*, Springer International Handbooks of Education 29,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-6555-9_28,

been judged according to lower expectations than the system norms and benchmarks set for other students by middle class and dominant culture communities. At the same time, we argue that the recognition of these students and their communities' lifeworlds, values, knowledges and experiences in the curriculum and in classroom teaching and learning relations is both a means and an end: a means towards improved achievement according to conventional measures and an end goal for reform and revision of mainstream curriculum knowledge and what is made to count as valued knowledge and practice.

The work that we report is based on an ongoing 4-year project,[1] nominally a design experiment, where a team of university teacher educators and researchers have partnered with school leadership and staff and Indigenous education leaders, with the support of a federally funded grant and the state teachers' union. The intervention, known as the URLearning project, coincided with the appointment of a new principal who had an explicit focus on social justice and equity. Her stated goal was reforming the school to achieve improved student learning outcomes. The context in Queensland, and Australia more generally, is one of increased systemic high-stakes accountability measures from state and federal governments. The development and implementation of the first national Australian Curriculum for subjects English, Mathematics, Science and History has heightened tensions around teacher professionalism and deskilling, test-driven accountability and scripted teaching. In response, the Queensland state education system has provided teachers with highly prescriptive units and lesson plans. While not mandated, these units and lesson plans are being used under the aegis of 'quality assurance' in many schools, raising questions about potential impact on professionalism in a state with a long tradition of school-based curriculum development. Our work in the school has focused instead on collaborative planning and teaching with the aim of demonstrating and documenting teacher professionalism and quality teaching with students from linguistic/cultural minority and working class backgrounds.

In this chapter we begin by stating our position on social justice. We then move to describe the research context of the URLearning project, discuss our approach and detail some early trends and findings about leadership and socially just reform. Using the idea of 'distributed leadership', which was a key focus at this school, we highlight the enabling effects of leadership by both school administrators and teachers. We recognise that teachers are the most important in-school factor in student outcomes. Our research in other areas (see Luke et al., 2011; Woods, 2009)

[1]This chapter reports data collected as part of an Australian Research Council-funded research project. We thank the teachers, administrators and students and the parents, elders and community members, who are our research partners on this project. We acknowledge the partnership of the school, the Queensland Teachers' Union, and the Indigenous community of and around the school, along with the support of the Australian Research Council. Our colleagues on the project are Michael Dezuanni, Vinesh Chandra, John Davis, Amanda Levido, Kathy Mills, Katherine Doyle and Wendy Mott of Queensland University of Technology and John McCollow and Lesley MacFarlane of the Queensland Teachers' Union. We also acknowledge Adrienne McDarra for her input into the project.

has demonstrated that shifting pedagogic relations in the classroom is crucial to social justice reform and achieving improved outcomes for all students. For this reason we discuss teachers' attempts to shift pedagogy as they worked in collegial relationships with researchers on our project team. We highlight the importance of making substantive links to the lives of young people and to local and more global events and disciplinary content as part of any curriculum reform process. We make the argument that social justice must be framed from both a recognitive as well as a redistributive perspective.

Social Justice in School Improvement

The term 'social justice' is used so frequently in Australian education and schools that the concept risks losing definition and purpose. We take as our starting point the notion that the goal of socially just education is to create educational contexts that 'empower historically marginalised peoples and challenge inequitable social arrangements and institutions' (Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8). To achieve the aim of meaningful education for all students, the literature foregrounds the importance of working towards an equitable allocation of resources and provision of opportunities, as well as providing educational contexts where diversity is recognised in positive and ethical ways. In her seminal work, Fraser (1997, 2003) discusses this as relating to recognitive and redistributive social justice. Recognitive social justice recognises the importance of making diverse languages, values, lives and experiences visible in education. Fraser (2003) describes the goal of approaches from this perspective as being about producing a 'difference friendly world' (p. 7). Recognitive social justice insists that a variety of ways of knowing and of representing knowledge must be central within the curriculum and the pedagogic relations of classrooms. Redistributive social justice, on the other hand, highlights the need for a 'more just distribution of resources and wealth' (Fraser, p. 7). From this way of thinking, social justice is about the provision of funds, resources and supports to the education of traditionally marginalised cohorts of students. Such egalitarian redistributive claims about the provision of funds and resources 'have supplied the paradigm case for social justice theorising over the past few decades' (Fraser, p. 7). A point of difference in the more recent context is that these resourcing shifts have been linked to increasing prescription and accountability.

Redistributive and recognitive ways of understanding social justice are often described as being from separate or even opposing conceptual paradigms (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). However, like Fraser (1997, 2003), we argue that approaches that emphasise one way of understanding socially just education at the expense of the other are likely to be inadequate, especially in our current climate of increasing diversity within schools and other education contexts. Our view is that school reform for equity is a matter of both redistributive and recognitive social justice. Balancing a focus on the equitable redistribution of resources and ensuring there is recognition of the lifeworlds, experiences, values and beliefs of all children

and their communities are the ways to progress towards the goal of a high-quality, high-equity education system. We take this framework into our investigation of one school, now in the third year of a reform cycle aimed at improving school outcomes for students.

Towards a Narrative Account of Collaborative Agency and Action

The school in which we work is located in a satellite city, which forms part of the urban sprawl of Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland. It is in one of the lowest socioeconomic areas of South East Queensland. The majority of the 600 students enrolled at the school live close by, with very few travelling from more distant locations. Accommodation in the local area is a mix of public housing, private rentals and some owner-occupier dwellings. The school has a significant population of Indigenous students, with somewhere between 11 and 15 % of the overall student body identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. A further 14 % of the student cohort is from varied Pacific Island cultures. In all, children from 23 different cultural backgrounds attend the school. Approximately 6 % of the school population meets stringent state system criteria for the English as a Second Language (ESL) programme. These are primarily migrants from Russia and Korea and students who arrived on humanitarian visas from Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan. Additionally, a large proportion of the student population has been ascertained as requiring some form of behavioural and/or learning support at some time during their school career. According to one of the special education teachers, all ascertainment categories for special education support are filled to allowable limits, with about a quarter of the early childhood cohort identified as needing specialist assistance for speech and hearing problems, behavioural problems and so forth.

The suburb in which the school is located is in the lowest quartile of communities by combined indicators of socioeconomic position. With a very high percentage of the families having incomes below the official government poverty line (approximately AUD $24,000 per annum), making ends meet is difficult for many families. This has been complicated by recent government ‘reforms’ in social welfare which have made school attendance a condition for receipt of family welfare payments. In summary this school was a paradigm case of a school whose students were impacted by the effects of poverty, pushed to confront a press for demonstrable gains in student achievement. This push became even more intense after increased funding was made available through the National Partnership Agreements.[2]

[2]During this time, the school became a target for large amounts of funding as part of the Federal Australian Government’s ‘Closing the Gap’ policies. National Partnership Schools (low SES) were the recipients of resourcing through increases to general funds, principal bonuses and targeted staffing options.

We have been working with the school leadership and staff, the local Indigenous community and the state teachers' union in a 4-year project to investigate what is required to turn around the performance of a school providing education for students from linguistic/cultural minorities and working class backgrounds. Our aim is to describe how enhanced teacher professionalism, realised through school-level curriculum planning for literacy, a focus on digital media arts, multiliteracies pedagogies, an Indigenous after-school cultural/homework programme and an Indigenous language revitalisation programme can generate improved outcomes for students *sans* the test- and standards-driven, scripted curriculum models (e.g. Luke, Woods, & Dooley, 2011). Specifically, we are looking for indirect and direct effects upon conventionally measured achievement, outcome and performance indicators. In theoretical terms, our emphasis is on teacher professionalism and recognitive social justice, which we introduced in a policy and school environment where the emphasis had been on redistributive justice and more highly prescribed approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

As the reform process began, behaviour management, truancy and disengagement with the pedagogy and curriculum, or even school refusal, were daily issues for staff and students. Special education interventions focused on dealing with the large number of students who were difficult to educate within classrooms, while a values programme attempted to bring some cohesion and whole-of-school consistency. The first task for the new administration team, dealing with behaviour issues and disengagement, was addressed by engaging the professionalism of the teachers and making moves to engage the local community, parents and local Indigenous elders and education leaders. Core to this approach was the implementation of a school-wide positive behaviour support programme. Funds and teaching resources were shifted to enable this to happen.

Once these first shifts began to demonstrate positive effects, the second approach was to enhance distributed leadership across the teaching staff in two ways: firstly, by providing opportunities for teachers to work with administration members to lead reform in particular areas and, secondly, to support all teachers as pedagogical leaders in their own classrooms through transparency in planning, pedagogy and assessment. Our team was also involved with capacity building through collegial curriculum planning relationships (see as an example Dezuanni & Levido, 2011) built on the foundation of whole-school reform and professional development that consistently required teachers to audit their practices and the assumptions on which they were building their practice (for a more detailed understanding of this professional development approach see Luke, Dooley, & Woods, 2011). Some of our planning and teaching techniques were modelled as we worked alongside teachers and made decisions with the teachers in the best interests of the students.

With effective behaviour management and attendance interventions in place, there had been a shift from deficit talk about students, families and communications in the staffroom. The after-school MediaClub (see Chandra, Woods, & Levido, 2013) and the Indigenous Cultural/Homework Hub programme (Davis-Warra, Dooley, & Exley, 2011) were flourishing. However, in the midst of all this activity, the school was struggling to show any substantive academic gains. There continued to be little

attention to substantive intellectual demand, to real-world knowledge and to meaningful engagement with the students' outside classroom worlds. Outside the school gates, exploding volcanoes halted air travel; Queensland had endured its worst floods in 100 years; debates about climate change and immigration dominated national and international media; and Australia's Indigenous peoples were renegotiating a new cultural and political accord. Yet much of the work in classrooms continued to focus on test preparation (Exley & Singh, 2011), basic skills acquisition, orchestrating the complex provision of special education services and everyday classroom management. Students and teachers appeared to be doing everything except 'reading and writing the world' with their students.

With the principal's green light, we had a long, difficult and somewhat prickly discussion in a staff meeting. The issue, we explained, was one of 'intellectual demand' (Ladwig, 2007) – of upping the ante under the expectation that students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, some who were still struggling with learning basic skills, were ready and able to discuss 'big ideas', to engage with discussions and talk about the world around them, and about field and disciplinary knowledge. We made an empirical case that while basic skills (e.g. phonemic awareness and recall) were necessary for improved achievement, they were not sufficient (cf. Freebody & Luke, 1990; Paris, 2005). We explained that sustained engagement and improved outcomes for the most at risk urban learners required intellectual demand, connectedness to the world and sustained conversation (Ladwig, 2007; cf. Hattie, 2008; Newmann & Associates, 1996). Finally, we concluded with illustrations about the use of web-based and print media resources to engage students in substantive content and to teach specialised discourses of science (Exley & Luke, 2009) and the arts. To study the storms and flooding across our state, for example, we modelled the use of newspaper and newscast weather reports (for content-rich examples of scaffolded classroom talk, see Dudley-Marling & Michaels, 2012). We worked with the teachers to consider ways to shift curriculum to more visibly account for the students' lives and experiences. We encouraged teachers to shift beyond pirates and giants as assumed content for curriculum plans.

These open and robust conversations marked the beginning of some real changes to the curriculum for some teachers. (see for example as reported in Mills and Levido (2011), some teachers embraced the digital component of the URLearning project and worked with the researchers to shift unit content to 'About Me' web pages (autobiographies) constructing web logs about their home life and community interests and sharing these with a local and global community). As one of the researchers worked alongside one of the grade 5 teachers in a unit about 'healthy places in my community', there were multiple opportunities to discuss the issues. On one occasion the two were walking with the students through the local shopping mall. The students were interviewing community members for their videographies on 'healthy places'. The teacher turned to the researcher and said, 'You should hear the discussions we're having now, the questions they're asking, and their understandings of the world'. The same researcher also recalled a long talk with a quiet 10-year-old boy, a recent migrant from Russia, who had been working on his video for this same unit. Before telling the researcher that both of his (university-educated)

parents were having trouble finding work because of their English, the student proceeded with a detailed comparison of health and weather conditions in Siberia *vis-à-vis* Australia. It was a classic case of a student's rich funds of knowledge coming to the fore in an educational context that otherwise would, in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1992) terms, 'misrecognise' his life experience and cultural background knowledge. The pedagogical approach in this unit aimed at the production of videographies not only provided opportunities for students' backgrounds and interests to permeate the curriculum in important ways but also engaged students in substantive discussions about issues important to their communities and the lives of those around them. This is a case where social justice was being addressed as a recognitive issue in the curriculum within the classroom.

Centralising recognitive elements of social justice in the reform of curriculum practice remained a challenge. For some teachers as they worked to up the ante on intellectual rigour in the curriculum, the default position was to focus on explicit attempts at distributing the linguistic resources of power and dominance across all students – to teach more basic skills or to be more explicit in their requirement of students to learn and use metalanguage, and these shifts had less to do with social justice in a recognitive sense. Of course these elements are an important part of the curriculum, but we have taken the stance that allowing for the lives, experiences and outside classroom capacities of all the students to be visible in the curriculum is equally important in school reform for children and young people such as those who attend this school.

Even for some of those teachers who displayed recognitive dispositions in their approach to engaging students, it continued to be more difficult to make these elements central to curriculum content selections. As an example of this, we will briefly discuss the early reform solutions trialled by one of the early childhood teachers who worked with us in a variety of ways while she taught at the school. This teacher had obvious recognitive dispositions. The classroom environment of her Year 1 class was one where expressions of diverse linguistic, racial and cultural identities were sought and welcomed. Regular classroom routines such as greetings and transitions were times when students and adults were encouraged to use a variety of languages. This same teacher engaged with diversity during breaks and after school. She was one of the most frequent teacher visitors to the weekly Indigenous Culture/Homework Hub and was the initiator of a lunchtime group to celebrate and build the cultural identity of co-ethnic females in the school. But while working with this teacher on curriculum planning, one of the researchers reflected that a redistributive focus on explicitly teaching dominant linguistic resources did take precedence over building the curriculum on the skills and experiences that the young students brought to the classroom.

This reflection came from collaborative teaching work conducted by the teacher and researcher. The collaboration was the result of the teacher's engagement in a Prep to Year 3 research discussion group facilitated by the research team members. The aim of the group was to provide a structured process for teachers to undertake self-identified investigations into aspects of literacy education, their pedagogy and their students' learning. Through regular meetings of the whole group and grade

and classroom level meetings and classroom work, the teachers selected, designed and implemented their investigations. For her project, this teacher decided to work on the language of narrative with her Year 1 students. Rather than focus on bringing the students' narratives into the curriculum, she extended students' repertoires of linguistic practice to literate forms such as those assessed in the Year 3 writing task of the national literacy and numeracy tests. Her concern was with the capacity of her students, who spoke culturally and class-inflected variants of English, to produce standard Australian English in high-stakes school literacy tasks. Accordingly, she decided to infuse a previously planned, integrated curriculum unit on pirates with oral language activities. The unit was to culminate in a written narrative produced for summative assessment under test conditions and an oral narrative performed for classmates. As the term progressed the focus sharpened on topic-specific vocabulary and the schematic structure of the narrative genre.

This teacher's approach to curriculum reform came from a distinctly redistributive claim, that of the importance of explicitly teaching students to acquire the linguistic resources of power and dominance, as opposed to leaving the acquisition of these resources to chance for those already being disadvantaged by a dominant education system. In many ways the decision to take this approach was vindicated, and the students performed well during the literacy tasks. Results on assessment items demonstrated that most of the students in the class seemingly understood and could use the metalanguage for describing narrative structure. The teacher reflected that she hadn't 'dumbed it down', instead she had used the technical metalanguage with her young students, and as a consequence of the students' achievements, the teacher reported that she had been telling other teachers not to underestimate the language learning capabilities of their students. In short, while pursuing redistributive goals in a high-stakes accountability environment, the teacher's approach had raised an aspect of the intellectual quality of her pedagogy and was challenging deficit discourses. This was consistent with our project goals. But the project sought also to encourage more substantive and respectful links to the students' communities and outside class lives while upping the ante on substantive disciplinary content and on the inclusions of local and global issues of importance. In the press to improve outcomes, the essence of this teacher's approach to engaging students' lives in the classroom was shifted to more routine spaces – morning talk and floor time – with the core curriculum calling on pirates as a medium for learning about skills and language mastery. The potential of recognitive understandings of social justice reform through more substantive links to the outside classroom lives of students was not always realised. Our approach to collaborative planning and working with teachers to research their pedagogical practice allowed teachers such as this Year 1 teacher to reflect on the issues related to these curriculum decisions within supportive relationships. Assumptions were challenged and for some this led to continued renewal of practices.

Now, in the fourth year of the reform cycle, we are able to report on progress to date and to reflect on the embedded nature of redistributive and recognitive social justice practice. Simply, the school performance has improved in several key areas; daily attendance is up, and behavioural incidents are approximately half what they

were when we first connected to the school. Parents are now more visible in the school across the school day, and there are tangible improvements to the general school climate and ethos. Students and their teachers are engaged in programmes based in learning and knowledge and are not so focused on behaviour management. Test score achievement is showing some signs of improvement, with gain scores and individual student tracking providing evidence that students are learning and improving their achievement targets. There remains much to achieve in relation to traditional outcome measures; however, there is a genuine drive and expectation that all students have a right and the capacity to achieve outcomes that will provide them with future pathways.

Funds from the National Partnership Agreements initiatives have been spent on developing capacity of teachers, and the results of this can be seen in the fact that, for most teachers, the recent system-based reforms that have raised levels of curriculum prescription have generally been met in professional ways, with the teachers remaining in control of the curriculum. Additionally, professional development sessions are now run by teachers and curriculum leaders based at the school. These sessions provide the opportunity for teachers to share practices and strategies. Other teachers have started to publish articles about their practices with members of the research team in professional association journals. One teacher has presented a lecture at the university and another teacher has lodged a submission to present her work at a state teaching and learning conference. Teacher professionalism is evident in these practices. The resources brought to the school by our project and used to purchase some computer hardware, cameras and audio recorders to be used as tools in media arts and literacy teaching and learning are matched by a school computer budget that means the sustainable replacement of equipment for this purpose is not reliant on outside resourcing. With respect to recognitive justice, many teachers are raising the level of substantive content within the curriculum. And the visibility of Indigenous students, their communities and concerns are visible and tangible in many of the school's practices. The Indigenous Cultural/Homework Club (Davis-Warra, Dooley, & Exley, 2011) caters to large numbers of students on a weekly basis; the school has an Indigenous language programme under its LOTE (Language Other Than English) component for students from Years 4–7, and the cultural studies component is provided to all students by an Indigenous Australian teacher. The school's Indigenous dance troop is active and has performed at significant events at the school and by invitation elsewhere, and the school choir, which comprises Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, recently sang the national anthem in the local Indigenous language at a reconciliation celebration at the school. At this same event, both the Australian and the Indigenous flag flew above the two Indigenous senior students who opened the ceremony by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land in local Indigenous language. This case supports Fraser's (2003) assertion that what is required to produce great schools for culturally diverse and working class students is a 'two-dimensional conception of justice that can accommodate both defensible claims for social equality and defensible claims for recognition of difference' (p. 9). There are elements of both recognitive and redistributive social justice in this school's approach to reform, with neither on its own being adequate

to shift outcomes at the school. The reform remains very much in process, but signs of improved academic achievement, recognition of difference and equitable resourcing are evident and provide hope for continued reform towards a more socially just education for the students involved.

A Concluding Comment

Buffeted by waves of demand for accountability, quantitative indicators of 'outputs' and 'performance', leadership 'targets' and so forth, this school and others like it are left to navigate many mandated interventions that masquerade as reform measures. The logic and coordination of these state- and federal-level moves often seem unfathomable to teachers and principals, much less students, their families and community elders at the ground level. As a direct result of the overwhelming number of reforms targeted at the school, we observed the leaders acting as human shields, deflecting bureaucratic noise and a mountain of accountability-driven red tape away from the core business of classroom teaching and learning. This leadership approach has provided space for teaching leadership to be the focus of reform.

What our investigation of this case has borne out are several of the axioms of the school reform literature. Sustainable gains in achievement take time, at least a 3–5-year cycle that can accommodate and generate cultural and discourse change in the staffroom and classroom, professional development and local development of a whole-school literacy curriculum plan, in the context of engagement with the culturally and linguistically diverse community. During our time at the school and as part of a complex, consolidated suite of reforms, we have focussed on three keys to improved literacy and language education: (1) the gradual elimination of deficit talk in staffroom culture, teacher planning and teachers' work (Comber & Kamler, 2004); (2) substantive and intellectually demanding teaching and learning about how to 'read the world'; and, correspondingly, (3) rich, scaffolded classroom talk around matters of substance and weight. Ironically, in the context of an intervention focused on digital arts, popular cultural forms and new multiliteracies, our work repeatedly returns us to core issues of 'reading the world' and providing substantive links to the lives of the students and their communities.

Thankfully, in this case, the combined efforts of the leadership team, teachers, students, extended community and researchers show signs of success. The school has succeeded in starting to shift standardise test scores but, perhaps more importantly, has won public recognition and awards from the community, the state system and Aboriginal elders. In our view, it was the push towards intellectual demand and substance and to making connections to the students' lives and experiences that supported the shifts in teaching and learning and classroom talk. However, we do not claim to have 'caused' these positive signs of improvement through our relationship and involvement in any linear or causal fashion. Instead, the view that we present is that – contrary to the most naive approaches to evidence-based policy and to the strict parameters of quasi-experimental inventions – the outcomes of research in complex school ecologies are not the direct result of our inventions – or any other

element of the reform process. One of the great ironies of school reform is its perpetual search for single causal explanations for improvement of student achievement. This is in part a legacy of the historical roots of the industrial school, where the early-twentieth-century language of agricultural crop yields, Taylorist industrial surveillance of work, and behaviourist stimulus/response models established a methodological and systemic bias towards explanation and improvement via singular pedagogical/curricular 'treatments'. The result is a policy tendency to blame 'failure' or inertia on failed 'treatments' or the incompatibility of student populations to benefit from them or teachers to implement them. Thus, the education context is left to continuously seek improvement via searches for new or innovative treatments – the Holy Grail of school reform.

In conclusion, our view is that school reform and its associated goal of improvement are attributable to complex and subtle changes in the social and professional ecology of schools. At this school, the shifts have entailed strong, instructionally focused leadership and multiple catalytic researcher/teacher partnerships that result in changed teaching/learning relationships in classrooms and in after-school settings. 'Social justice' for these students and their communities can be improved via concentrated professional development and conversations that do not lose sight of the goal to mobilise, enhance and exchange teachers' professional knowledge, capacities and professional repertoires in ways that, in turn, enable the mobilisation of intellectual and discourse resources by students. In this, our final year on site, we are currently studying the sustainability of such an approach without the intensive input of teacher educators and research partners. We are also interested to consider if it is possible to expect that teachers will sustain collegial curriculum relationships with each other in the fray of practice, without at least first experiencing those facilitated by external educational enthusiasts. Part of our next challenge is documenting the complex and multiple interactions that enable and facilitate such conversations and collegial relations, without falling prey to the readily available formulae of school and curricular reform that – with all good intentions – seek out simple causal explanations of school reform, renewal and improvement.

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