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Challenge, community and a fair go



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Education and a fair go

For over 15 years, the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney has run a research program about classroom engagement known as the *Fair go* program, which is concerned with equitable outcomes for students from low SES communities, and focuses on pedagogies that produce high level engagement. The program has gone through a number of iterations. Three examples of individual projects include:

- Long-term partnerships between academics and teachers in classrooms (Fair Go Team, 2006)
- co-researching with exemplary teachers of students from poor communities (Munns, Sawyer et al, 2013)
- working on models of teacher-to-teacher mentoring around engaging pedagogies.

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(Erebus International 2005: 15)

This article addresses the second of these; an Australian Research Council Linkage project known as *Teachers for a fair go*. The project focused on a group of 28 NSW teachers in contexts ranging from preschool to matriculation who were regarded as *exemplary* in engaging students from Priority Schools¹ with their education. The Priority Schools Program was an initiative of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training and was a co-researching

partner on the project.

The schools represented in the project serve communities that are in the lowest socio-economic strata of NSW. The experience from the inside is that *concentration of disadvantage rather than disadvantage per se is the significant driver of educational under-performance* (Erebus International 2005: 15). Despite the current plethora of discourse over the importance of the teacher in student success (eg Hattie, 2009), the *Fair go* program is not naïve about the importance of public policy on poverty for educational success in poor communities. Addressing the equity gap in education requires addressing a range of measures including:

- public policy on poverty
- public policy on educational equity

- teacher action in the classroom.

The *Fair go* program focuses on the part of that mix over which educators have most control: pedagogy.

Overall findings

The overall findings of the *Teachers for a fair go* project have been published elsewhere (eg Sawyer et al, 2013; Munns, Arthur et al, 2012), and the project identified several learning experiences that contribute to improved learning outcomes for students in low SES communities. These are summarised here. *Fair go* classrooms are characterised by:

Quality learning experiences

These include:

- *high cognitive work*, expressed through intellectual challenge and sustained conversations focused on teaching and learning
- *high affective commitment* by students, achieved through classroom community building

and a risk-accepting culture in the classroom

- *high levels of attention to focused and appropriate behaviour*, achieved by prioritising learning and targeting and minimising student resistance, along with thoughtful repertoires of practice.

Inclusive classroom cultures

Fair go teachers implement processes which help learners to become part of the learning community. Students are recognised as valuable members of that community, and, what is termed the *insider classroom*. Some of these processes are:

- *building a community of reflection*, through promoting learning as a shared responsibility and providing support and time for reflection about learning
- *building whole-class responsibility* for self-regulation of behaviour

¹The Priority Schools Program gained its very raison d'être in setting out to narrow the equity gap for public school students in the poorest communities of NSW. To this end the program allocated considerable resources and energies to the professional development of teachers in the (then) 574 Priority Schools across the state (411 rural and 163 urban). The PSP was committed to addressing the educational effects of entrenched poverty through its work in schools and the Program's administrators saw classroom pedagogy as fundamental to their work. Teachers on the project all worked in Priority Schools



- *prioritising teacher inclusive conversations* through the conversational tenor of the class
- designing tasks which invite conversation and focus on learning
- *engaging students in self-assessment* through:
 - an environment of questioning
 - conscious building of cooperative
 - learning processes involving peer support for each other's work
 - support for personal task assessment processes
- *considering teacher feedback carefully*, linking back to the focus on learning, with high expectations and an emphasis on reflection and self-regulation.

Strong support for individual students

In *Fair go* classrooms, students receive

strong, consistent, positive messages about:

- their *knowledge* and *ability*
- their degree of *control* of the classroom through the focus on learning, not compliance
- their *place* (their community and their classroom as a place of learning)
- their *voice* in the classroom, through collaboration, sharing and reflection (Sawyer et al, 2013).

Contexts and challenges

When introducing the contexts in which these teachers worked, Munns, Hatton et al (2013) identify eight *themes* that *represent the complexity of the low SES teaching experience and that play out ...arguably across different low SES community and language groups through the developed world* (p. 34).

These concern populations of students:

- whose oppositional behaviour places significant physical, emotional and pedagogical pressure on the classrooms
- from impoverished housing estates
- from inner-urban multicultural communities
- who need support in achieving outcomes in literacy and numeracy and across all curriculum areas
- who are new to the language of the nation in which they find themselves (such as Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) students), many of whom may be from refugee backgrounds
- from Aboriginal backgrounds
- living in remote communities
- with special needs (pp.34-37).

Not all schools in low SES communities are the same. As Munns, Hatton et al

(2013) point out, there are classrooms in low SES schools *where students are academically able, keen to be involved and not strongly pressured by the conditions of their existence* (p. 34). For example, a key challenge for one of the teachers was students who were too compliant and expected that schooling primarily equated with training for success in standardised testing.

Nevertheless, low SES contexts throw up a series of quite specific challenges, many around the intersection of these eight themes. Student histories in such contexts, can include for example, refugee trauma, violent backgrounds, inter-generational unemployment, transience affecting school attendance and negative family experiences with schooling. Community support for schools may be high with accompanying student aspiration, but may also be low, critical of the school, or even resistant. Some schools will have intersections of a number of these themes, such as



poverty, isolation, high proportions of LBOTE students and histories of inter-generational unemployment.

The effects of particular school structures can be intensified in such contexts. Student transition from primary to high school, in NSW for example, can mean moving from one teacher to too many teachers, too many rooms, too much separated learning and no integration; factors that can exacerbate already existing problems with schooling. Poor outcomes in the early years of schooling may never be made up later, especially if these outcomes are around literacy. Negative attitudes to schooling among students can manifest as peer pressure not to perform well. In such contexts, teacher attitudes can also become negative. High staff turnover can lead to lack of consistency in teacher-student interactions and help build a climate of reaction, rather than the school being driven by a vision. Broader systemic issues of

accountability through standardised testing and the operation of league tables through the publication of schools' results are inevitably damaging to schools in these contexts, such as, in Australia, through The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the [MySchool](#) website. This damage then becomes further exaggerated against a background of media with their own ideological agendas.

Meeting the challenges: teachers as researchers

A fundamental part of the *Teachers for a fair go* project was the role of the teachers as researchers of their own and others' practices (Munns and Sawyer, 2013; Mayes and Sawyer, 2014). The research commitment that teachers undertook in joining the project was to:

- write about their practice on engagement (as part of the

- application/selection process)
- agree to be the subject of a case study, but also to co-author the case study itself
- read and respond to the case studies of other teachers on a project intranet
- participate in an intensive cross-case analysis over six days at the conclusion of all the case studies.

Cross-case analysis

The last of these processes meant that at the conclusion of the case studies, all of the teachers, academic researchers, research assistants and an external *critical friend* assembled for six days to interrogate the data and develop cross-case analyses. During these days all co-researchers carried out fundamental research work by:

- reviewing data
- coding and categorising data
- re-considering previous categorising

- mapping findings against literature.

On these specific days, it was particularly the work of Haberman (1995, 2005) that informed practice. Processes included:

- defining key issues and key terms
- re-conceptualising the data
- interrogating the taken-for-granted (*We know high expectations are important. How do we achieve buy in from the students?*)
- interrogating the explanatory force of the *Fair go* model of pedagogy
- taking different *cuts* through the data (e.g. giving a focus to creativity, or literacy).

Cross-case analysis: emerging responses to challenges

These processes began with a discussion of teachers' contexts and how any challenges, such as those discussed above, were being met. Of course,



any such discussion also became data and was used along with the data that had already been gathered in the individual case studies. Nevertheless, initial considerations of these issues as a group, who were meeting face-to-face for the first time, were interesting, particularly in the light of the study's overall findings. In these initial considerations, the teachers' responses to key challenges in their context fell into four groups as outlined below.

Prioritising learning over focusing on behaviour

This was the overarching issue stressed by this group in relation to their own challenges. Practices emphasised at that stage of the analysis included setting high expectations, showing trust early, and setting class learning goals that revolved around questions such as:

- *How will I achieve this?*
- *How will I know when I have?*

Consistency, continuity and

predictability were seen as important. While risk-taking was seen as necessary for real learning, this needed to be built from a predictable and consistent set of practices and from consistent teacher responses and a calm environment. The teachers also stressed *deep* planning, (*Plan hard and teach easy*, Munns, 2013, p.49), and explicit class discussion on processes of teaching and learning. They saw exploiting teachable moments as important and worked to quickly develop a mindset in the class of seeing transgressive behaviour as preventing learning and preventing teaching.

Differentiating the curriculum

As far as possible, the teachers aimed at individualising the curriculum and doing this through negotiation. This was about not teaching to the class *average* but *knowing students and looking for the small differences between them* (most agreed this was more difficult in a high school environment where they may be teaching up to 150 students).

Developing a positive classroom culture by focusing on class identity in order to create a sense of belonging

This entailed as much positive affirmation of students as possible – affirmation which aimed at building confidence, but which, importantly, needed to focus on specific achievements (*You can now do this, which you couldn't before*) in order to keep the focus on prioritising learning over behaviour. Teacher awareness of the emotional climate was critical. Student *ownership* of the class environment was seen as key here also; negotiated choices within boundaries were regarded as important, as was regular reflection with the students on how the class was progressing.

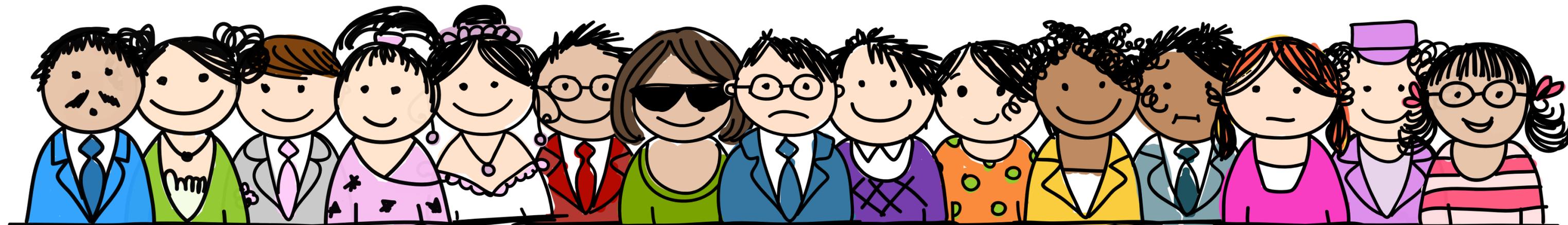
Building community

This was spoken of in terms of the local community outside the school and the learning community of the classroom. Connecting to the local community

was regarded as important, by trying to keep the parent conversations positive and focusing on what students were achieving. Building the classroom learning community meant giving time to individual students. Listening with respect was emphasised often. Using students as teaching assistants/mentors was noted as one way of doing this, which in itself also treated the classroom as *shared space, our space*. Having students articulate their own strategies for success and, reflecting on learning and learning processes was fundamental for this group of teachers. Finally, inviting the local community into the learning community was also seen as important.

Classroom as community

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practice for student commitment and *buy in*.

From this brief overview of the cross-case analysis initial discussions on meeting challenge, a key theme that has developed is the emphasis on community and this is the focus throughout the rest of this article. It is interesting how often successful engagement in these classes revolved around some manifestation or other of community, or community building. For example, when analysing what the *Fair go* teachers were doing around high affect in their classrooms, practices which built a community were highlighted. Creating real commitment

to tasks and to learning overall, across the range of teachers, stages and contexts, saw community building as a central practice for student commitment and *buy in*. Teachers may have high expectations, but students need to *buy in*.

Developing student ownership

The first key principle was working toward student ownership of the learning space in order to create the class identity referred to earlier. In the early years of schooling, this was manifested in a physical environment, which was inclusive of students, reflected their work and was characterised by:

- easy access to resources
- flexible planning
- students being trusted to use technology
- developing a sense of student responsibility through strategies such as using students as

teaching assistants and expecting accountability.

The use of inclusive *we* language was also notable in the classrooms from the early years of schooling:

- *we make the decisions*
- *we can work with others or by ourselves*
- *we are learners together.*

In the middle years, this language was more *you* focused and tended to encourage students to see the classroom work and related decisions about that work as *theirs*. In the later years, practices such as having students design assessment rubrics for the class also reflected the principle of ownership. A strong part of this principle was a degree of negotiation of classroom curriculum at all levels, including preschool. This sometimes reflected students' interests and tended to give a sense of agency to students. Thus, student *buy in* (commitment) was

partly accomplished by working on a degree of student ownership of classroom practice. Such ownership was manifested in students having choices (of tasks, topics, texts, presentation modes, or with whom they worked), giving them a voice in the conditions of successful learning. Putting weight on ownership in this way creates a communal identity (*In this class, we...*). It also conveys a strong message about student capabilities, and reflects positive messages about students' place and their voice (see discussion of learning experiences above, and Sawyer et al,

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2013: pp. 94-95, 107-108). *We're all in this together* was the culture of these classrooms.

Sharing intellectual challenge

It is important, of course, that community building is not just about a culture of feel-good safe welfare (Munns, 2005). It was not just that in the practices of the *Fair go* teachers that made the difference. In a very important essay from 1976, Douglas Barnes showed from his surveys of secondary teachers across the curriculum that it was *precisely those teachers who value social relationships who also value intellectual exchange* (1976, p. 145). Barnes saw this as somewhat counter-intuitive in 1976 and it probably remains so today. However, the findings from *Teachers for a fair go*

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demonstrate the connection, in terms of engagement, between high cognitive work and the manifestation of high affective commitment in the classroom through building a classroom identity. It could be argued that this is not a necessary connection, but one which occurred serendipitously among these teachers, or even that this is not a connection at all, so much as simply two parallel factors existing in these classrooms. The reply to this is that the *We are all in this together* culture of these classrooms was not feel-good mateship so much as taking on the *intellectual* challenges together. Affective commitment through choice and voice was seen by these teachers as fundamentally important in contexts that could so easily be resistant. That was not achieved by *dumbing down* the curriculum. *Choice and voice* were not about trivia, but about *how* the learning, the *intellectual* exchange was best done; *How will making this choice help me to get on top of this material?* In this sense, it was the very challenge of the intellec-

tual work that created the community, that is; *We're all in this (intellectual challenge) together*².

Conclusion: challenge re-visited

References to students or schools as *challenging* usually carry negative connotations. However, challenge is also about the *call to engage*. The teachers in this project were working with those challenging issues which teachers in many low SES schools face across the world. However, they saw these challenges as a call to engage, largely and often viewing challenge as an invitation to develop their skills, knowledge and practices. In this context, their responses can be seen as *creative*, using that word consciously to describe an intellectual, deliberative process, not a moment of genius. The call to engage

²Interestingly, this also reflects the way highly effective teachers operate in communities with each other. In a study of highly effective teachers of the NSW Higher School Certificate, it was found that teachers who obtained outstanding student results that were highly atypical of their context- and did this over an extended period -worked against a background of very strong Faculty communities which created a particular culture around their subject. They shared ideas and resources, planned and programmed together, built towards the HSC in Years 7-10 and situated important professional learning within the Faculty itself (Ayres et al, 2000, 2004). A following study of highly successful teacher groups in schools made similar findings about Faculty cultures - the English Faculties in the study were conceptualised in the study (following Fish, 1989) as interpretive communities (Sawyer et al, 2007)

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was also set to their students; *challenge* being presented as crucial to learning. Teachers saw their own work in terms of intellectual, creative and deliberate action, and set out to facilitate that mindset in their students. Crucially, these teachers saw working with their students as being a *long project*. They were not expecting quick outcomes or simple solutions, since strong pedagogy attached to developing relationships takes time. Accepting this commitment was reflected in their attitude to challenge itself.



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