Critical literacy and social justice

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Abstract
Given the global escalation of gaps between rich and poor, contemporary work in critical literacy needs to overtly question the politics of poverty. How and where is poverty produced, by what means, by whom and for whom and how are educational systems stratified to provide different kinds of education to the rich and the poor? Yet rather than critical literacy, international educational reform movements stress performative standards on basic literacy. In this context literacy researchers need to ask policy-makers hard questions about taken-for-granted rhetoric that surrounds poverty, literacy and education. At school, regional and state levels, educational leaders need to argue for fair resourcing and decision-making for their communities and students. In classrooms teachers need to weave critical questioning and inclusive learning interactions into the fabric of everyday life.

Introduction
One of the so-called 'wicked problems' confronting most nations is poverty, or the unequal distribution of resources. This problem is perennial, but how, where and with which physical, psychological, social and educational effects, and for which students (and their teachers), needs continual scrutiny. Poverty is relative. Entire populations may be poor or groups of people and individuals within nations may be poor. Poverty results from injustice. Not only the un- and under-employed are living in poverty, but also the 'working poor'. Now we see affluent societies with growing pockets of persistent poverty. While there are those who dispute the statistics on the rise of poverty because different nations use different measures (for example see Biddle, 2013; http://theconversation.com/factcheck-is-poverty-on-the-rise-in-australia-17512), there seems to be little dispute that the gaps between the richest and the poorest are increasing (see http://www.stanford.edu/group/scspi/sotu/SOTU_2014_CPI.pdf).

The kinds of poverty that are being produced now may be different to those of the past. Economist, Thomas Piketty (2014, p. 571) concludes that:

> A market economy based on private property, if left to itself, contains powerful forces of convergence, associated in particular 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.

Because wealth distribution is occurring on a global scale, Piketty (2014, p. 571) believes that those who 'own nothing but their labor' are increasingly susceptible to dominant entrepreneurs, who prevent institutional democracy and with consequences he sees as 'potentially terrifying'. A recent OECD report (http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/social-issues-migration-health/society-at-a-glance-2014_soc_glance-2014-en) indicates growing numbers of people report having 'problems making ends meet' and that young and low-skilled workers are hardest hit and face long-term 'scarring' effects. They face a future of

diminished earnings and job prospects, at a time when public spending on education has declined. This is a particularly dangerous mix.

We hear of 'deep and persistent disadvantage' (McLachlan et al., 2013), and of increasingly divided populations with gaps between the affluent and the poor that impact on young people (Stanley, Richardson & Prior, 2005, pp.102-103.

> We are already seeing the emergence of a divided society…The children of the poor live a strikingly different life. Increasingly they crowd into low-income suburbs with poor-quality physical environments and public facilities, and worrying levels of crime and disturbance. They go to under-resourced schools with stressed teachers, and go home to parents distracted by worry about how to pay the latest electricity bill.

A divided society translates into the residualisation of poor youth into certain schools (Kenway, 2013) impacting on teachers' work. In the US, James Ryan (2010, p. 13) writes of schools only five miles apart, where 'the politics of separation' ensures that young people's lives and educational futures remain 'a world apart'. As Ryan observes (see also Lipman, 2011; Luke, 2012; Ravitch, 2010) high stakes testing has done nothing positive in terms of guaranteeing a high quality, high equity education. Moreover Berliner (2013) argues that educational inequality cannot be solved by schools alone but by tackling wider social problems of inequality of income and lack of employment. Raffo and colleagues (2010) in the UK note that while education is seen as a way out of poverty, it is typically the poor who gain least from schooling in terms of educational credentials and opportunities.

So what do the injustices associated with poverty have to do with critical literacy? Education, literacy in particular, is often purported to offer the possibility of social justice. For some 'working-class' and immigrant baby boomers, completing high school and going on to higher education was indeed the ticket out of the kinds of poverty experienced by our parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, if Piketty is right, the game has changed. Hence contemporary work in critical literacy needs to overtly question the politics of poverty: how and where is poverty produced, by what means, by whom and for whom and how are educational systems stratified to provide different kinds of education to the rich and the poor?

Paulo Freire (1972), often recognized as the initiator of critical literacy, understood that critical literacy could enable workers and farmers to ask questions about their conditions and argue for their rights. Freire conceived of teachers as cultural workers because they could assist people to understand how things were organized to benefit the privileged. Now however the whole concept of teachers acting as brokers of powerful learning and questioning is under challenge from global educational reform movements that want teachers to enact scripted curriculum and deliver basic literacy (Berliner, 2013).

These international trends require critical literacy and action at multiple levels – at a policy level from researchers to ask hard questions about taken-for-granted rhetoric that surrounds poverty and education (Berliner, 2013; Luke, 2012; Ravitch, 2010); at a school, regional and state level, from educational leaders to argue for a fair resourcing and decision-making for their communities and students; and at classroom

level, from teachers to weave critical questioning and inclusive learning interactions into the fabric of everyday life (Sandretto & Klenner, 2011).

Social justice and critical literacy
Different theories of social justice underpin critical literacy (see Zacher Pandya & Avila, 2014). My early conception of critical literacy (Comber, 1994) involved the following pedagogical moves:

- Repositioning students as researchers of language
- Respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy
- Problematising classroom and public texts

This approach was informed by Freire, but also by Australian sociologist R.W. Connell's identification of a key principle of social justice as working in the 'interests of the least advantaged' (Connell, 1993, p. 43). Learning from the standpoints of women, the poor, and indigenous peoples, in Connell's view could lead to curricular justice, by changing what counts as valued knowledge. It is more urgent than ever to interrogate common and national curricula being instituted in many countries and states. In Connell's terms: What might constitute 'curricular justice'? Whose interests are represented? What constitutes knowledge? What is open to question and negotiation? What kinds of social justice might be needed to underpin our critical literacy curriculum designs? What kinds of dilemmas are faced daily in schools serving our most disadvantaged communities? If Piketty is correct then the kinds of knowledges and skills education provides will be increasingly significant to the quality of life young people can enjoy.

Longitudinal studies of young people growing up in poverty indicate that the following factors at school make a difference to the literate repertoires they assemble:
- the resources factor (the extent to which schools have the human and material resources they need)
- the curriculum factor (the quality, scope and depth of what is made available)
- the pedagogical factor (the quality of teacher instructional talk, teacher-student relationships and assessment practices).
- the recognition factor (the extent to which what students can do counts and that they can see that it counts)
- the take-up factor (the extent to which students appropriate literate practices and school authorised discourses)
- the translation factor (the extent to which students can make use of and assemble repertoires of practice which they can use in new situations). (Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon & Pitt, 2002)

Such heuristics examine curriculum provision, what different learners do with specific learning opportunities and the long-term consequences. Standardisation, measurement, comparison, and high stakes tests may contribute to deficit thinking and the removal of educator agency (Werts et al., 2013). Given that many schools serve increasingly diverse student communities; have responsibility for educating students in continuously changing digital and communication technologies; and address

escalating pressure to lift and sustain measurable standards on high stakes – it is harder, but more important than ever, to keep equity frameworks in the foreground.

Researching in schools in high poverty and working-class areas I hear about "literacy blocks", "literacy agreements", "whole school literacy plans", "literacy coaches", extra "literacy bolt-on lessons" in high schools to enhance cohort results on standardized tests. It seems the 'literacisation' (Comber & Hill, 2000) I feared some years ago has arrived, whereby literacy becomes both the problem and the solution to educational inequities. Such an emphasis can be dangerous when coupled with ruthless economic rationalist and neoliberal approaches to government which assume that hardworking literate individuals will always be guaranteed well-paid work. Literacy becomes complicit in false promises and deflects attention away from the fundamental injustices. Tamara Spencer (2014) warns of a similar problem in contemporary in early childhood literacy policy when a 'research canon' is appropriated by the media and policy makers, namely, blaming educational inequities on poor parents so-called failure to speak with their children. If learning deficits can be located in the families' practices, rather than in the social or educational budget, the better for governments!

One school community, where I am currently researching the relationship between educational leadership and turnaround literacy pedagogies (Comber & Kamler, 2004) has recently learned of the impending closure of the Holden car manufacturing plant. It is too expensive to build cars in Australia. Holden has been the major employer in the area for decades and a great deal of employment and services are associated with it. This is already a high poverty area. The future is bleak. The leadership team is working hard to produce knowledgeable teachers, to ensure clear agreements in offering a balanced literacy program, proper resources for literacy, including rich literature, access to new technologies, understandings of positive psychology and more. However we witness the daily complexity of their work as families grapple with effects of poverty. These manifest in the schoolyard and classrooms as high levels of illness, stress, tiredness, absences, outbreaks of violence. It is hard work to enhance literacy learning in the face of such material challenge. This is not to subscribe to a deficit discourse, but to note that poverty and place do impact on whether young people come to school and sometimes how they arrive in terms of their physical and mental well-being.

Critical literacies: investigating people, poverty and places
Recently I worked with teachers in Christchurch New Zealand, where communities are still struggling with the aftermath of the earthquake over three years later. While some people seem to have been able to command the capital and the resources to have services and buildings fixed, others are still living in damaged dwellings and with limited infrastructure. The repair work is very uneven. After Cyclone Katrina, feminist geographer Cindi Katz observed that:

> Geography is always socially produced. And so every landscape can reveal sedimented and contentious histories of occupation; struggles over land use and clashes over meaning, rights of occupancy, and rights to resources. (Katz, 2008, p. 16)

After disasters, the poor seem to get poorer. These trends are depressing and demoralizing. However there are instances of teachers exploring the affordances of such tragedies with young people to tell new stories through dramatic play and story-telling (Bateman, Danby & Howard, 2013) film-making (Mills, Comber & Kelly, 2013) and using urban regeneration to reclaim a sense of belonging in place through place conscious pedagogies (Sánchez, 2011).

Where can teachers turn to investigate the relationships between people and places, work and wealth? Educational magazines such as 'Rethinking Schools' offer analyses of such phenomena. For example a recent issue featured an article (Gutstein, 2013) entitled, 'Whose community is this? Mathematics of neighborhood displacement', provides an account from a high school teacher who designed the curriculum to develop students' understandings of Mathematics and justice in the context of gentrification, bank-loans and the changing value of dwellings. Such a curriculum brings high level academic understandings together with students' lived experience and provides them with the intellectual means for complex analyses. Yet some literacy lessons we observe consist of repetitive routinized activities practiced day in and day out – fickle empty literacies, like copying and coloring in, which foster compliance and quiet, but little else. Scripted pedagogies quickly become barren landscapes for teaching and learning when stripped of significant content and concepts. Instead in such contexts it is imperative that literacy lessons are occasions for complex and critical meaning-making, for students to assemble sophisticated analytical repertoires which they can apply to social phenomena such as poverty, youth unemployment or workers' rights.

Educators as critical media and policy analysts
The press sometimes contributes to the meta-narrative of blaming the poor (Comber, 1997; Maguire, 2007; Berliner, 2014). One story, often repeated, tells of poor folk who spend their welfare money on the wrong things – alcohol, gambling, trendy clothes, and so on. Another story is of the likelihood of violence and drugs in poor areas such that some places become demonized no-go zones, except of course for those who live there. These stories of communities become 'texts of terror' (Rappaport, 2000) – dominant cultural narratives – which actively reproduce dangerous stereotypes and chains of logic and literally change the ways in which poor youth might be seen by their teachers.

However there are important sites where counter-stories are produced in various media. Here I take just one example. In Australia a magazine produced each fortnight entitled *The Big Issue*, is sold on street corners, malls and at public events. These magazines provide a range of texts that both give reliable and easily accessible information about poverty and injustice and about how this is experienced by different people.

> We are an independent, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to supporting and creating job opportunities for homeless, marginalised and disadvantaged people. Simply put, we help people help themselves….
> (http://www.thebigissue.org.au/about-the-big-issue/about/; accessed May 7, 2014)

In the United Kingdom, where *The Big Issue* originated and where it is still published, a recent issue featured first person accounts of 24 hours in the lives on the street of

different vendors (http://www.bigissue.com/the-mix/news/3849/the-real-24). Each issue contains a range of topical articles, letters to the editor, interviews with public figures, cartoons, some facts about poverty and homelessness and vendor profiles. Facts include memorable one-liners like: "One in every 200 Australians are homeless tonight". Without becoming didactic articles include quotations from interviews with leading cultural commentators such as author Tim Winton speaking of affluence in contemporary Australia: 'It is a preposterous country and a rich culture, but we are remarkably incurious about those that get left behind in prosperity's wake'. As *The Big Issue* journalist reports not everyone is 'indifferent to those left behind in the boom' (Quick, 2014, p. 27) and she goes onto to include photographic images of patients and doctors treating homeless and marginalized people in Perth, Western Australia.

The Big Issue organization is now offering workshops for school students that help to put poverty on the education agenda. Such workshops are particularly valuable in more privileged areas.

Getting out of deficit: Guarding against basic recycled literacies
Inequities in education relate to both poverty and place (Green & Letts, 2007; Lipman, 2011; Raffo et al, 2010). Even opportunities for ambient literacy learning may be unequal (Jocson & Thorne-Wallington, 2013). If contemporary inequalities are beyond those that can be attended to by national states because they are increasingly associated with problems of global capital (Piketty, 2014), then our frameworks for social justice need to be global. What constitutes social justice can no longer be framed within national boundaries (Fraser, 2009). What determines whether people get to live a good life is no longer determined only within the nation state. Fraser maintains that:

> [T]heories of justice must be three dimensional, incorporating the political dimension of r*epresentation* alongside the economic dimension of *distribution* and the cultural dimension of *recognition* (Fraser, 2009, p.15, my emphasis).

These three dimensions of justice have informed thinking about social justice in literacy education (Woods, Dooley, Luke, Exley, 2014), including my own. However as Fraser explains it is now increasingly difficult to work out the 'who' and the 'how' of justice in times of globalization.

> [T]the forces which perpetuate injustice belong not to 'the space of places', but to 'the space of flows'. Not locatable within the jurisdiction of any actual or conceivable territorial state, they cannot be made answerable to claims of the state-territorial principle (Fraser, 2009, p.23).

In closing his economic analysis covering 2 centuries Piketty argues for the importance of history in understanding how things came to be as they are and how they might be changed and that social scientists, activists, journalists and commentators, and I would add educational researchers, 'should take a serious interest in money' (Piketty, 2014, p. 577). 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.

Designing curriculum with a social justice agenda requires knowledge about the relationships between people, places and poverty. This will mean enhancing teacher knowledge of economics, statistics, geography, politics and history. Future critical literacy practices need to engage teachers and students in investigating relationships between changing phenomena, including money, rather than a static embracing of the old so-called basics and compliance with the status-quo.

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