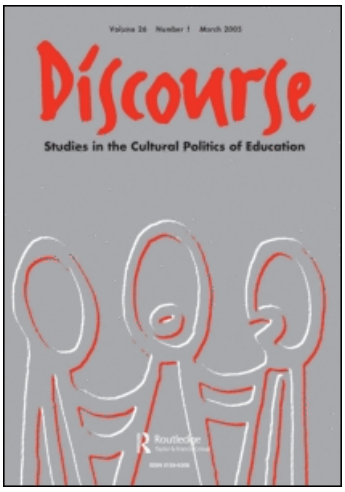

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Researching for social justice: contextual, conceptual and methodological challenges

Robert Hattam [a]; Marie Brennan [a]; Lew Zipin [a]; Barbara Comber [a]
[a] School of Education and Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Magill, SA, Australia

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Researching for social justice: contextual, conceptual and methodological challenges

Robert Hattam*, Marie Brennan, Lew Zipin and Barbara Comber

School of Education and Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, St Bernards Road, Magill, SA, 5072, Australia

Reforming schooling to enable engagement and success for those typically marginalised and failed by schools is a necessary task for educational researchers and activists concerned with injustice. However, it is a difficult pursuit, with a long history of failed attempts. This paper outlines the rationale of an Australian partnership research project, Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN), which took on such an effort in public secondary schooling contexts that, in current times, are beset with 'crisis' conditions and constrained by policy rationales that make it difficult to pursue issues of justice. Within the project, university investigators and teachers collaborated in action research that drew on a range of conceptual resources for redesigning curriculum and pedagogies, including: funds of knowledge, vernacular or local literacies; place-based education; the 'productive pedagogies' and the 'unofficial curriculum' of popular culture and out-of-school learning settings. In bringing these resources together with the aim of interrupting the reproduction of inequality, the project developed a methodologic which builds on Bourdieuian insights.

Keywords: pedagogical innovation; educational disadvantage; research methodology; funds of knowledge; professional learning community

A research project in multiple contexts

The design of any research project faces multiple challenges, not least the selection of worthwhile and practicable design that addresses longstanding problematics in the field. In this paper, we reflect on the many ways in which the project design for the Australian Research Council-funded project known as Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN)[1] was a creature of its place and time, responding to contexts of structural change in an area of high poverty, intergenerational unemployment and poor infrastructure. Since there has been a good deal of research that identifies such problems, and/or analyses efforts to redress them, any single project needs to be careful to avoid mere replication, or a design that fails to acknowledge the significantly inter-related issues which work to shape the setting – as well as the project itself. However, most research represents itself as building on or addressing a gap in prior research. This connection to other research is essential, as we later discuss, but an insufficient explanation of how a project develops in relation to its political, cultural, economic and social-geographic milieu.

*Corresponding author. Email: robert.hattam@unisa.edu.au

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In this paper, we first set a broad political-historical context for the schools where the project was located. We then elaborate the conceptual resources we marshalled to address challenges for redesigning curriculum and pedagogy that, in pursuing socially just change, go against the grain of many policy and contextual constraints currently acting on, in and around schools. In discussing both contextual challenges, and how we wove together conceptual resources to contend with them, we amplify a framing approach, or methodo-logic, for the RPiN research. By 'methodo-logic', we thus do not mean research methods or even methodology, but rather the logic of an approach for chasing socially just change through research, including guiding principles that underpin decisions and activities in all points and dimensions of the project. The final section then summarises the project's approach at work.

The starting point for this project was a Bourdieuian insight: that people enter schooling from different structural positions, associated with differing social habitats, wherein – through early-life practical immersion – they embody distinctive qualities of cultural disposition, or 'habitus'. These dispositions in turn operate selectively in schools as 'cultural capital' of stronger or weaker species (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1998) summarises his longstanding concern with the problem of schooling that reproduces social stratification:

> The educational system ... maintains the preexisting order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital. More precisely, by a series of selection operations, the system separates the holders of inherited cultural capital from those who lack it. Differences in aptitude being inseparable from social differences according to inherited capital, the system thus tends to maintain preexisting social differences. (p. 20)

In schools, dispositions of lifeworld-based habitus acquire greater or lesser 'capital' value depending on how near or far they stand in relation to 'standard' (i.e. power-elite) cultural codes that dominate in mainstream curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In some communities, referred to as 'disadvantaged' but more appropriately termed 'disenfranchised', the cultural habits brought to school by significant proportions of students are not utilised or scaffolded to traditional school learning methods and contents. Simply put, their 'virtual schoolbag' (Thomson, 2002, p. 1) is not unpacked. Rather, their lack of fit with the culturally arbitrary selections that are valued by school become individualised and internalised as 'failure'. Recent data, after many years of educational reforms, do not demonstrate significant improvements in achievement levels for major targeted groups (McGaw, 2007).

Following Bourdieu, Teese and Polesel (2003) are explicit in their argument about how the reproduction of social stratification occurs in schooling. Students whose embodied capital, or habitus, does not match the cultural arbitrary of schooling miss out in two significant ways. First, the curriculum makes no connection with their learning in their community contexts, so that there is no *intrinsic* value to engage them in the educational experience. Second, as a result of this lack of connection, students miss out on the *extrinsic* value of the certificate that gives access to further education, training, and employment. In RPiN, the lifeworld contexts of schools become a key focus for research and innovation; any project that hopes to address the problem of cultural capital must focus on pedagogies that start to connect school-based learning with students' own lifeworlds in their communities. Only when

schooling is organised to make this link can the experience of intrinsic value in education become established, and enable scaffolding to success in the mainstream curriculum, leading to extrinsic rewards from schooling. It was a focus on pedagogical innovation to make the experience of schooling intrinsically rewarding that underpinned the methodo-logic of RPiN.

There are multiple context factors that militate against being able to pursue such a significant shift. The broad political environment – especially at the federal level where education is made into a populist political football, but where there is no constitutional responsibility for schooling – has been strongly driven by neo-conservative and neo-liberal discourses. The Coalition federal government that held power from 1996 until 2007 had increased funding for private schooling relative to public (Brennan, 2005), resulting in 34% of total 2007 enrolments in non-government schools. Further, simplistic 'crisis' talk about public schools in government policy and media, with derision towards any who offer a more complex picture, has had the effect of creating larger markets for private schooling. The RPiN project had to work within this broad governmental and media discourse of blame, and also had to work hard to resist being *defensive*, in order to keep problematics open to investigation.

In addition to the punitive political context, we saw four other, inter-linked, and truly *complex* crises that provoked both urgency to address challenges of inequality, and difficulty in doing so. First is a crisis of youth identity formation in and around schools: issues of curriculum and pedagogical relevance are intensifying as school populations become more socio-culturally diverse and complex and youth identities more saturated by media culture (Kenway & Bullen, 2002; Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Second is a crisis in post-compulsory schooling: Australia ranks poorly in comparison to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in post-compulsory qualifications (Considine, Marginson, Sheehan, & Kumnick, 2001), exacerbated by a breakdown of traditional 'pathways' into the labour market (Dwyer & Wyn, 1998). The full-time youth labour market has all but collapsed and young people have to find their way into a labour market that is increasingly deregulated, part-time, with decreasing protection for workers and with a premium on post-compulsory credentials (Vickers & Lamb, 2002). Third is a crisis of teaching: teachers endure chronic work overload and de-professionalising pressures (Ball, 2000; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000). The increasing complexity of Australian society is experienced in the classrooms of Australian schools, and exacerbated – most acutely in the public school sector – by simplistic government mantras to do more with less (see Comber & Nixon, 2009, in this symposium). Fourth, and perhaps most significantly, is a crisis of equity: policy settings of the past few decades have made little impact on how schools contribute to reproduction of inequality (Connell, 1994; Teese, 2000; Teese, Davies, Charlton, & Polesel, 1997), and stratification between schools has increased. Indeed, the Coalition governments' 1996–2007 policies managed quite successfully to wind back commitments to social justice. The RPiN project was thus committed, against the grain, to develop a research design that redressed social *in*justices among the most marginalised.

RPiN was set in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia, named as one of the top three sites of social exclusion in Australia (Social Inclusion Unit, 2007), and the only metropolitan area in the country so designated, although there are many other areas of poverty, unemployment and poor health in

what has, until recently, been a country of relatively less steep social stratification than in other nations. The state economy has not bounced back after the recessions of 1981 and 1991, leading to higher levels of stratification and poverty, exacerbated by neo-liberal approaches to government (Newman, Biedrzycki, Patterson, & Baum, 2007). As such, it has been the target for national and state intervention programs and the subject of many studies, such that many residents, community groups and agencies feel 'over-researched'. Schooling contributes to stratification, as retention and success rates are among the lowest in the country, and the worst in any metropolitan area. For example, one school in the project has sent only seven students to university in six years, and the public school population is dwindling through competition from private schools as well as demographic shifts.

In such a negative geo-political context, the project had to establish strong partnership between the university and schools if it was not to be 'firewalled' from the active life of schools, relegated to the 'white noise' of policy rhetoric, multiple policy interventions and simplistic media-manufactured 'crisis'. At an operative level, the team of some 15 university researchers, and roughly 30 teacher-researchers – three from each of the 10 regional secondary schools (including an adult re-entry campus) – were the chief collaborators. At the same time, interaction among the official 'linkage' partners was crucial. It comprised four key elements: the university team; a group of 10 public secondary school principals spanning three 'districts' of a region; the Australian Education Union (SA Branch); and the state Premier's Social Inclusion Unit (with an agenda to improve retention rates across the state). All partners contributed money and time, and participated in a Project Management group that met regularly over the three years of the project. Local ownership arising from the partnership was a critical dimension in sustaining a level of commitment for the time it would take to substantially redesign pedagogy and curriculum through classroom-based projects. Importantly, the linkage side-stepped a more usual partner in such efforts – the state Education Department's head office – so as to prioritise the action dimension of the project without undue answerability to state-wide accountability and performance criteria.

In such contexts, projects that take up longstanding problems not only need 'good methodology' to realise valid and useful results, but also to contribute to capacities of school teachers and leaders to respond to 'discourses of derision' (Ball, 1990). A difficulty for research aiming to redress social injustice is that political, media and community discourses tend toward deficit views of 'less advantaged' regions and populations, which can easily be reinforced by research attention. Our design required particular care not to reinforce stereotypes about schools in high-poverty regions, or generate data that are easily misinterpreted, given the 'educational fundamentalism' prominent among Australian political and media interests in the early 2000s. During the project, a number of the schools had to battle media attention that tended to demonise their students, stereotype staff, or talk up 'crises'. Interim project publications arising from teacher research circles, and additional foci developed by the university team, not only recorded emerging understandings but also built a language for shifting from deficit to *asset* perspectives. There is, of course, no guarantee of positive results in investigations. Thus all of those participating needed to become articulate and conversant with nuances of the political scene, as part of the research project.

While schools may want to close their doors in defensive protection from negative populist attention, project capacity to sustain collaborative investigation through multiple action-research cycles required openness of trusted communication, along with vigilant reflexivity, among all concerned. It also required strong methodological resources to keep a project focus on the core intention of the RPiN methodo-logic: to *engage* students in learning by building strong and meaningful connection between school curriculum and local community lifeworlds.

Making community curricular: building on antecedent research resources

RPiN's overall methodo-logic drew significantly on the work of Lisa Delpit (1988), whose theory of the 'culture of power' in classrooms specifies how schooling works to exclude or silence students from less powerful structural positions. For Delpit, schools tend to naturalise and normalise the 'codes and rules' of those who already have power in society, including their 'linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing and ways of interacting' (1988, p. 283).

In our interpretation, Delpit argues for two crucial moves. First is to *engage* students in learning by infusing curriculum and pedagogy with rich familiarities of lifeworld knowledge and practice. Second is to *scaffold* from this engagement to explicit and practicable learning of the cultural codes (or 'capitals') needed for success in mainstream curriculum work, but which are usually left implicit rather than explained. However, the latter move is accompanied by critical-analytical contrasts (at age-appropriate levels) between the codes of lifeworld-based ways of knowing, and those of mainstream school knowledge. This exposes the *arbitrary* cultural power of school-valued knowledge. Delpit thus does not merely use life-engaged knowledge as a stepping stone to get to what is 'really' important, but, in placing the two in critical juxtaposition, continually values the ways of knowing from learners' broader and deeper lives. In the first instance, says Delpit, 'we must keep the perspective that people are experts on their own lives ... they can be the only authentic chroniclers of their own experience'; but in the second instance, students must also be 'assisted in learning the culture of power' (1988, p. 296).

Unlike many reformers, Delpit, like Bourdieu, acknowledges the challenges of deep power imbalances coded in institutional mechanisms of schooling. In social justice terms, her moves work not only to prevent students from internalising a sense of 'deficit' as learners, but to make it possible for them to experience education as '*for*' them. The power game of sorting and selecting is not removed, but it is exposed, opened to challenge by students and teachers – which also opens room for learning that values lifeworld knowledge, particularly if there is community support. In inciting teachers to develop 'ethnographic imagination' (Willis, 2000) about students' lifeworlds, Delpit also incites ethical commitment to provide learning in which 'less advantaged' learners (and their families/communities) experience their knowledge as valued, gain socially critical capacities, and reap both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

This Bourdieu/Delpit framing provides a direction for teachers committed to an 'egalitarian sensibility' (Hattam, Smyth, & Lawson, 1998, p. 1), but not without deep challenges. Such curricular and pedagogical work seeks to reconstruct literacy and other cultural dispositions of less powerfully positioned students in ways that both are more inclusive and redistribute power more equitably. This requires sensitive

identity work, negotiating changes in pedagogical practice across multiple sites of home, community and school (Hattam & Howard, 2003). Curricular and pedagogical balance must be struck between: (1) inclusive use of the repertoires of literate knowledge and practice that diverse students bring to school; and (2) effective learning of 'dominant capitals' necessary for success in mainstream institutional terms (Zipin & Brennan, 2006).

In working to craft a dynamic and responsive methodology that could take up Delpit's challenge, we saw need for a *strong* logic of connection, which we gained from a range of conceptual resources (deriving from movements in the USA and UK, both of which have a history of steeper social stratification than in Australia – and, ironically, more significant efforts to redress educational mechanisms that (re)produce stratification). These included: building teachers' 'ethnographic imagination'; using family 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005); vernacular or local literacies (Luke, O'Brien, & Comber, 1994); place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003); and the 'unofficial curriculum' of popular culture and out-of-school learning settings (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001).

The question that emerged from reflection on this large body of work was: How might we redesign curriculum and pedagogical practice that poses high intellectual challenge to learners in ways that engage their lifeworlds and concerns of their communities? Below we briefly elaborate key insights from this range of approaches. Our challenge was to weave them into a 'complex conversation' (Pinar, 2004), within a framing methodo-logic of address to our question.

Productive pedagogies

Of particular importance to RPiN was a prior project in Queensland (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006; Lingard, Ladwig, Luke, Mills, Hayes, & Gore, 2001). The term 'productive pedagogies' was coined by the Queensland research team to signify pedagogical principles that, in practice, correlate most strongly with learning for the widest range of students. Twenty pedagogical principles, bundled in four main categories – intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environments and dealing with difference – were tracked empirically in classrooms across the state, in one of the most sustained longitudinal studies conducted in Australia. The study found that 'supportive learning environments' was most consistently evident across schools, academic subjects and regions. 'High intellectual quality' was less consistent, especially in pedagogical work with traditionally 'less advantaged' groups. 'Connectedness' to learners' lives was even less frequent; and least 'was dealing with differences' – which is implicated in 'connectedness' to specifically s*ituated* life locales. The Queensland team acknowledged that their notion of 'connectedness' needed conceptual work, including in terms of how it links to taking 'differences' seriously. Still, their classroom observations about pedagogy, and its many curriculum implications – including their concept of 'rich [curriculum] tasks' – was a crucial starting point for RPiN, directly provoking our impulse to connect curriculum and pedagogy with learning resources from diverse student lifeworlds.

Through action research collaboration, the RPiN university team saw ways towards worthy departures. The Queensland view of 'productive pedagogies' came from university researchers observing classrooms. RPiN sought to create a more direct methodo-logical route to community 'connections': through teacher–student

negotiations, and student implementations, of lifeworld-based curriculum projects. Teachers and students thus effectively acted as co-researchers of student lifeworld knowledge and its possibilities for curriculum connection. RPiN was then able to rely not only on classroom observations of a university team, but as much on teachers' experienced senses of difficulties encountered, and design supports needed, to 'make community curricular'. Our impulse was to weave together elements of approaches that could interrupt deficit views about 'disadvantaged' learners that inhere in mainstream stress on 'standards' which implicitly encode power-elite ways of knowing. Indeed, RPiN sought collaboration only in schools of a high-poverty region, not across social-economically varied regions of a state. We wanted to see how learning that connects strongly to lifeworld-based *assets*, or funds of knowledge, might both engage such students more vitally, and challenge the intelligence that – we hoped to demonstrate to teachers, students and other educators – was *not* 'less' than that of learners from more 'advantaged' places.

Funds of knowledge

Having foregrounded rich connectivity with students' lifeworlds as our central focus, we drew strongly on the 'funds of knowledge' approach that was elaborated by Moll and colleagues. Put succinctly, say Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), 'Our claim is that by capitalizing on household and other community resources, we can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote instruction children commonly encounter in schools' (p. 132). The term 'funds of knowledge' refers to those 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (p. 133), pertaining to 'social, economic, and productive activities of people' (p. 139) in local communities. Funds of knowledge include 'social history of households, their origins and development ... the labour history of families', and 'how families develop social networks' 'including knowledge skills and labour, that enhance the households' ability to survive and thrive' (p. 133). This approach explicitly confronts the deficit views that some teachers have of disenfranchised communities, observe Gonzalez and Moll (2002), instead assuming that 'people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge' (p. 625). Against traditional curriculum that either misrepresents or mutes far too many communities, the funds of knowledge approach represents 'communities in terms of the resources, the wherewithal they do possess, and a way to harness these resources for classroom teaching' (p. 625). Methodologically, the approach entails teachers and university researchers ethnographically investigating local households, deploying a combination of field observations, open-ended interviews, oral histories and case studies (Moll et al., 1992, p. 132). This knowledge is then treated as a resource for classroom instruction.

Rather than having teachers and students work with knowledge already codified in books, websites, videos, etc., the funds of knowledge approach sees teaching-and-learning as itself a locus of knowledge production. In earlier renditions of this approach, there was separation between ethnographic research by teachers and university researchers, who then brought 'discovered' funds of knowledge into classroom use. But in Gonzalez and Moll (2002), the approach shifts: students themselves 'learn ethnographic methodology and research their own communities'

(p. 625). Students-as-researchers are thus positioned both as knowledgeable people, and as knowledge producers.

Building ethnographic imagination among teachers

Ideas of infusing curriculum with lifeworld relevance are not new and have taken various forms. We can find arguments in Dewey, Freire, Vygotsky and even Aristotle. A principle of this set of ideas and practices is that teachers are seriously inquisitive about the lifeworlds of their students and the concerns of their communities.

Marcus (1998) argues for ethnography 'predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups' (p. 83). The ethnographer studies relationships, language in use, and the 'circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities' (p. 79). Applied to teachers, gaining ethnographic imagination means that, with all their needed expertise in fields of academic knowledge and subject discipline, they need also to operate as *learners* in relation to their students: to be open to learn from students about their lifeworlds. Curriculum-building ethnographic work includes students-as-researchers of their own life situations, witnessed and engaged by teachers. Teachers with ethnographic imaginations design curriculum that amalgamates generative, topical and academic themes (Shor, 1992). Generative themes are negotiated with students and arise from everyday life: the most significant aspects of the students' 'present, existential, concrete situation' (Freire, 1972, p. 68).

Ethnographically imaginative teachers do not necessarily conduct ethnographic research in students' lifeworlds (although they might); but in any event, they look to create opportunities for students to define existential issues of their communities, discuss which of these are urgent, and examine these issues more fully. Such teachers, says Pinar (2004, p. 187), bring 'academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment' into a 'complex conversation' in classrooms.

RPiN was not funded sufficiently to buy time for university and/or teacher researchers to go into local communities as ethnographers. Our approach was rather to negotiate curriculum projects with students, by which they function as ethnographers of their own lifeworlds, feeding teachers' imagination and providing grounds for empathetic understanding and pedagogic design work. Students were thereby treated as experts in-and-on their own worlds; and researching their lifeworlds became school-validated curricular work.

Place-based education

From the perspective of RPiN, the 'funds of knowledge' approach was bent to a range of curriculum themes that Moll and colleagues, in their focus on households, does not centre. The urban fringe area of our project is an extraordinary complex of networks and industries, histories and activities that are locally celebrated but rarely understood. We thus expanded the focus on connections between local community and school knowledges by supporting teachers to grasp a wider conception of 'place-based' education. This approach designs curriculum that enables 'students to connect what they are learning to their own lives, communities, and regions' (Smith, 2002, p. 587). From a standpoint in local and familiar knowledge, this approach

extends learning to more 'abstract' knowledge from less familiar places. It documents regional cultures, maps community assets, researches local environmental phenomena, has students identify and investigate school/community issues, and creates internship and entrepreneurial opportunities for students to think through deep relations between vocations and place (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001).

Gruenewald's (2003) 'critical pedagogy of place' links social-historical to geographic/spatial themes and problematics worthy of student research. Sites and themes for investigation include multi-cultures, urban places, ecological challenges, decolonisation and re-inhabitation. Issues of place – and who embodies/represents given spaces – became critical for RPiN teachers, many of whom were from 'the North' themselves or had developed long affiliation with the region. Seeking ways for young people to portray place from *their* perspectives – for those who inhabit 'the North' to re-present it – invites different and knowledge-creating interpretations and semiotics. Widening the search for knowledge of place beyond households enabled use of this approach across a greater range of secondary curriculum subject areas, from arts to legal studies, environmental studies, mathematics and English.

Through a focus on funds of knowledge in concretely situated places, our approach further enabled local literacies to be made curricular. A 'local literacies' approach holds that traditional school curriculum ignores the rich literacy practices and usages in non-elite communities, thus treating people with structurally less powerful local knowledge as though backward and ignorant (Street, 1994). Current 'multiple literacies' research seeks access to and validity for 'vernacular literacies' (McLaughlin, 1996) of vital use in subcultures that are marginal, misrepresented or absent in mainstream institutions. Thinking about literacies in this way opens possibilities of studying local dialects, vernacular languages of local youth subcultures, or rap music, as just a few examples. Taking interest in local literacies, teachers assume that their students are intellectuals, and hence look for their *theories* in vernacular modes: 'theory that would never think of itself as "theory"' (McLaughlin, 1996, p. 5). 'Vernacular here refers to 'the practices of those who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns' (pp. 5–6) – i.e. subjugated knowledges mostly overlooked in mainstream curriculum. Pedagogy sensitive to vernacular theory begins as 'a pedagogy of the everyday, recognizing students as master interpreters and canny theorists of the culture they inhabit' (McLaughlin, 1996, p. 154).

A particular sub-set of vernacular or local literacies became important in RPiN: the value that many students placed on popular culture and media. Research into the 'unofficial curriculum' of popular culture and out-of-school settings helped us to trace links to nodes of learning in young people's lives, including student ethnographies of vernacular, popular and sub-cultures that young people inhabit in, around and beyond school (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001). That popular and media culture vie with schools and families as significant sites of youth identity formation seems no longer controversial (Bigum & Green, 1998; Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren & Peters, 1996); yet schools still have difficulty finding ways to allow popular and media culture into the classroom as serious material for investigation, including relevant technologies, especially in under-resourced schools such as in RPiN.

In summary, the RPiN methodo-logic proceeded from a commitment to *engage* students from a high-poverty region, through *strong connection* of curriculum to funds of knowledge from their lifeworlds, rather than lack of connection to

alienating 'capital' from the culture of power (Thomson & Comber, 2003). From the focus by Moll and colleagues on household funds of knowledge, we extended to exploration of wider local literacies and pedagogies of place in multiple arenas of local community knowledge production (industries, histories, environment, for example). This is quite different to so-called 'child-centred' pedagogic traditions often used to 'keep children as children', shielded from 'realities' of the 'adult world'. In communities with high poverty and unemployment, contending with racism and social exclusion, young people are hardly unaware of more subtle and complex realities than educators tend to imagine (see Zipin, 2009, in this symposium). Young people can indeed be met as knowledge producers, agents of their own worlds, including difficult knowledge about their social or economic circumstances. The 'local' in this sense is not a restricted, tightly boundaried area but connected to wider places and spaces as loci for knowledge production. Local literacies thereby become *relational* literacies, creating bridges networks across nuanced lifeworld spaces (too easily generalised in terms such as 'community'). The project of curricular and pedagogical redesign thus moves between schools and lifeworlds, and links *epistemological* understanding with *ethical* commitment to the lives of those marginalised in mainstream schooling.

Researching the connection between lives and learning

RPiN located its work in the middle years of schooling (Hattam & Prosser, 2008; Prosser, 2008), as a key site for establishing student engagement. In a region with very low student retention, the middle years – when curriculum becomes compartmentalised and fraught with judgmental selectivity – was a crucial locus for confronting serious consequences, in student lack of engagement, for later achievement and retention (Cormack, 1996; Hill & Crevola, 1997). In taking up the challenge to redesign curriculum and pedagogy, the team fused multiple strategies. Teachers and university colleagues participated in two year-long cycles of action research. A significant 'professional learning community' was established through plenary roundtables in which university and teacher researchers met several times a year, supplemented by specific professional development on issues requested by groups of teachers (such as student exhibitions or photostory), and meetings at the schools. We started with teachers bringing artefacts provided by students, which they identified as holding significance in terms of lifeworld issues and meanings; and with peer interviews to construct teacher biographies. At the end of each year, the Australian Education Union sponsored a state-wide conference on middle schooling, at which RPiN teachers presented on their projects to colleagues attending. Students' work was examined at research circles, along with assessment items and unit designs. Six teachers completed a research Masters degree based on their RPiN work, and a number earned graduate certificates, drawing on the reading, project work and writing associated with the project. The RPiN website[2] records student artefacts, media and other representations, teacher task design and assessments. These project documentations can inform current and incoming teachers who work in this region, hopefully sustaining RPiN influence. Project updates and topical short papers were produced regularly throughout the project to record emerging issues and findings, and to communicate with the larger body of peers, and also principals, in the area schools. University team members met regularly with principals. Regular meetings of

the Management Group kept communication lines open across project partners, and identified opportunities to link RPiN to school priorities.

The project did not, of course, work in perfect accord with our methodo-logic. Teachers and university researchers followed their curiosities about lifeworlds of their students, swerving and inventing researchful strategies that students might use to explore issues that mattered to them. Some teachers were able to do so relatively easily; others struggled with the demands of their subject, with less than supportive colleagues and with students inclined to hold to their accustomed positioning as 'outsiders' to the main curriculum game, given their habitual distrust that schools could respectfully bring their lives 'inside' the curriculum (see Sellar, 2009, in this symposium). Enough did, however, suggest that the combination of approaches developed offer rich resources for teaching and learning in marginalised schools.

We have taken this opportunity to reflect on our connections to other projects and their traditions in order to explicate our curriculum and pedagogical design principles for pursuing socially just educational change, and their translation into methodology, in the spirit of dialogic work that acknowledges both the aspirations and expectations of long-term research. There is still much work to be done in analysis of the data produced by teachers, students and school teams, within and across the 10 schools of the project. The methodo-logic of the project took many iterations over the three years in which it was conducted, and we needed to find new ways to express the Delpitian argument for working the funds of knowledge students bring into the classroom with and against the cultural capital valued in traditional schooling. One testament to possibilities-within-constraints of projects such as RPiN is that of a principal who, caught in his position as 'manager', with many competing demands on time, money and effort, often asserted that he could not give priority to RPiN in his school. And yet, in this excerpt from an end-of-year interview, this principal was able to say in a nutshell, with lyrical insight, the core orientation of the project and its hopes. We leave the last word to him:

> I remember being involved in the RPiN project, you know, last year, and one of the pieces of excitement that seems to have come out each year is the giving of permission to teachers to explore kids' environment and learning, and the teachers learning something ... The whole business of teaching ... is much more do-able when the teacher is consciously saying 'I can learn something valuable from you students' ... I can remember one of the teachers going out and filming spots ... out in the physical community, spots that were important to the students ... social points, congregation points, ... and from that you get a little story, a little anecdotal description of the context, and that gave the teacher the chance to learn something about the kids' environment, so the kids got to say, to perform their learning ... and that have capacity to know, the teachers wanting to know that, as a basis to say 'Well, what learning can I do in maths ... art or music, knowing this about the kids' environment?'...
>
> The sheer learning of that environment was the most valuable thing they will do in terms of a tool of intimacy and relationship building, and purpose to the teaching. So that's the type of PD [professional development] that's there ... the sort of nice conceptual basis is that the teachers celebrated learning from the students, which is all about power too ... it's about sharing power, and sharing the role of the teacher ... And it's not necessarily the information that's important; it's the honouring the [life]world by the teacher ... you can understand the role of the teacher, honouring the learning of the world of the young person.

Notes

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2. See Australian National Schools Network website for Connecting Lives and Learning: http://www.ansn.edu.au/

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