

Background

This is an edited version of a keynote address given by Associate Professor Debra Hayes (University of Sydney) to the NSW Priority Action Schools Conference on November 29, 2006, in Sydney. In her presentation, A/Prof Hayes draws upon research both in Australia and overseas to make the case that pedagogical leadership is needed to bridge the widening equity gap in our society.

At the start of the 21st century, school leaders face many new challenges, but perhaps the greatest challenge is one that abides with us from centuries past: improving the educational outcomes of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. In Australia, this task is getting harder because the gap between the richest and the poorest in our society continues to grow (ABS, 2004). The depth of the problem is reflected in the OECD's 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which shows that when Australia's results are compared with similar countries, such as Finland and Canada, the relationship between social background and achievement is stronger here.

In addition, Australia is ranked 18th in terms of the proportion of gross domestic product spent on education, whereas it is ranked 3rd in terms of private spending on education. This means that the balance in education funding is shifting towards private sources and thereby reinforcing the capacity of people who are socially advantaged to care for their own children (OECD, 2006).

In educational terms, the equity gap may be defined as the difference between the curriculum, and the cultural and pedagogical resources available to students (Teese & Polesel, 2003). In this discussion, I want to elaborate on these elements of the equity gap, and to suggest how educational leaders might respond to the continuing need to improve the educational outcomes of those who benefit the least from schooling.

Beginning with the curriculum, writ large it is how we understand the purposes of schooling. It can function in weak or strong ways to support teachers and school leaders to respond at the local level to the highly differentiated and unequal affects of globalisation (global flows of people, culture, knowledge, information, communication, conflict, etc). Curriculum theorists and philosophers of education tell us that the curriculum needs to be more flexible and that it needs to focus less on the transmission of knowledge and more on the skills and literacies associated with accessing, manipulating, and communicating knowledge, while at the same time conservative politicians and commentators are calling for a return to the basics and traditional content.

In his keynote address to the 2006 Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference, Professor Fazal Rizvi (University of Illinois) outlined a number ways in which the curriculum should be preparing students to respond to a more globalised world. I want to discuss three of the points he raised, and to use these to illustrate how the curriculum needs to change to reduce the equity gap. First, he claimed that the curriculum should prepare students to be cognitively flexible. One way of interpreting this suggestion is to say that students need to be able to code shift. For example, many young people use informal English when communicating with their friends and families. Cognitive flexibility allows them to switch to formal English when appropriate, thus giving them access to what Delpit (1995) has termed the "codes of power". This is a sophisticated skill: we cannot expect it to come naturally to young people. It is something we have to teach them, introduce them to, and give them opportunities to practise.

Secondly, students need to have intercultural understanding and cultural sophistication that allows them to solve problems from multiple perspectives. Young people growing up in Australia have complex cultural identities that position them in various ways as insiders and outsiders. Although removed from the ongoing conflict that fractures many other societies around the world, an appreciation, knowledge, and valuing of other cultures is critical if diversity is to be a source of enrichment, and not division.

Thirdly, young people need the ability to work collaboratively and to share knowledge and expertise. This has always been an important skill, but it is increasingly so as the scale of global problems demands greater cooperation, information sharing and collaboration. For example, how we are attempting to manage our water resources illustrates the importance of this skill set. This is not a problem that any one group in society can fix: it is a problem that requires cross-sector, multiple perspectives, and broad-based expertise. This is the kind of issue that will occupy the minds of young people increasingly in the future.

The message is clear that if we are going to bridge the gap between the curriculum and the pedagogical and cultural resources available to students, we need to move the curriculum towards young people in ways that make it more deeply relevant and connected to who they are becoming. At the same time, we need to make the curriculum more responsive to students who generally do not succeed at school, even though they may draw upon rich cultural resources and life experiences. Many of these young people do not complete their schooling or, if they do make it through, they do not do well. This situation is deeply worrying because it is often at odds with other aspects of their lives where they may demonstrate a capacity to communicate in two or more languages, sometimes functioning as translators for parents and other family members; they may have deep understandings of their cultural traditions; and they are often expected to exercise maturity beyond their years by looking after siblings or parents who are unwell, and holding down part-time jobs.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) developed a theory of *cultural capital*, which explains that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources of members of society. Schools take for granted certain linguistic patterns, authority patterns, and types of curricula. The resonance between middle class children's experiences at home and those at school facilitate their adjustment to school and increase their likelihood of success, thereby transforming cultural resources into cultural capital.

We need to broaden the cultural resources that schools draw upon and privilege. An important first step is to challenge persistent deficit ways of thinking about young people, their families, and their communities, that may be made visible through teacher talk and rigid school structures. We need to make the curriculum more rewarding and more open to including and recognising the cultural resources that young people bring with them to school (Thompson, 2002).

The pedagogical resources available to students vary greatly from school to school. These resources are often the lowest in schools serving communities with deep needs. In one such school in which I am currently working, one faculty is made up of two first year out teachers who are being lead by an acting head teacher in her second year of teaching, having spent her first year as a casual, and two unfilled vacancies are being taken up by casuals. So in terms of the pedagogical resources available to young people in this school, it is clear that they are desperately low. In another school, the principal refers to his executive as a 'reserve team' because most are acting in their positions, as the principal is unable to find permanent staff to take

up these roles. In this situation, the pedagogical resources available to teachers are desperately low.

In circumstances like these, we can't expect teachers to go first in making the changes that are necessary to their practices to better cater for the needs of students with high levels of poverty and difference. School leaders must be prepared to lead the way through their own practice. This is primarily a pedagogical challenge; it requires understanding leadership as primarily pedagogical in purpose. But what does this mean in terms of what needs to change? How might the role of a principal or a head teacher change? What would they do differently?

We can be sure that if teachers do not have the opportunity to experience pedagogical leadership, if they do not have the opportunity to see their leaders functioning as leaders of learning, then we cannot expect them to do it. Similarly, this challenge is not limited to school-based educational leaders: it extends to those who work in regional and state offices. How can we expect school principals to lead learning, if their system leaders are not demonstrating or modelling leading learning?

Leaders of learning consider what needs to be learnt in order to complete a task; what needs to be understood in order to achieve agreed targets; what skills need to be practised and developed in order to improve practice. We know that professional dialogue supports these processes, but when did you last have the opportunity to sit and reflect in a sustained way on your practice in a school setting? When did you have the opportunity to do that with colleagues? And when did you have the opportunity to learn something new? If you work in a regional or state office, ask yourself the same question: when did you have the opportunity to sit and reflect with your colleagues on your practice? I don't mean a discussion about what you should be doing, what strategies you are implementing, or what program you are 'rolling out'. This is a question about your practice as an educator - your pedagogical practice.

Unfortunately, this type of leadership often comes last; it tends to be the last thing on the agenda of our executive meetings (if it gets there at all). So how do we prioritize learning? How do we make sure it does not come last? Ted Sizer, the Chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools, made popular the saying "less is more" (<http://www.essentialschools.org>). To illustrate what this might mean, consider your priorities for a recent planning period which may have been documented in an action plan, and do a mental stock take of what you actually achieved. What is the evidence that you actually achieved what you set out to do? So often we only achieve a fraction of what we set out to do, and we can only show weak evidence of what we claim we have done.

We need to find ways of doing things differently in schools so that when we set out to achieve a target – it's one we can achieve, it's one we all agree we want to achieve, and we throw everything into achieving it. We need to be more modest in our claims. Small achievements are much more important than a lot of dot points that amount to wishful thinking.

Educational leaders cannot go through a day and not have effects - but are they the effects we want? It may be possible to get closer to the effects we want by coupling purpose to practice in planned and considered ways. This coupling is difficult because it is often difficult to think and reflect during the course of a school day. It involves setting clear purposes, identifying the effects that match these purposes, and selecting the practices to best achieve these effects. A quick test of how well you are going is that no teacher or student in your school should be in any doubt about what they are meant to be doing, or why. It is something that school leaders should

continually articulate, and if you can not state your purpose in a few sentences, keep practising, because you need to know, and your teachers, parents and students need to know. Your purposes need to be clear and explicit – that is part of your pedagogical role, to make explicit the purposes of the school, and to reinforce them over and over again.

Practice reduces to being busy when there is no clear purpose, and we know that it is very easy to become very busy in schools. Pedagogical leaders take the time to identify and measure what it is they want to achieve. This is how they know that they have successfully led learning. I am not suggesting that leading learning is easy, but it *is* necessary if we want to bridge the equity gap in education.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) *Measures of Australia's Progress 2004*, Catalogue No. 1370.0
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Delpit, L.D. (1995). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. In *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom* (pp. 21-47). New York: The New Press.
- OECD (2006). *Education at a glance: OECD Indicators 2006*. Paris, France: Secretary-General of the OECD.
- Teese, R, & Polesel, J. (2003). *Undemocratic schooling: equity and democracy in mass secondary education*. Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press.
- Thompson, P. (2002). *Schooling the rustbelt kids: Making the difference in changing times*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.