

Relational pedagogy and the role of informality in renegotiating learning and teaching encounters

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This paper provides a conceptualisation of relational pedagogy in which informality is proposed as a pedagogical modality to activate inclusive, socially just learning and teaching encounters. Findings from two ethnographic studies conducted in alternative learning contexts are examined, which demonstrated that informality was crucial to the formation of pedagogical ‘activations’ that marked the conduct of each learning context and the interactions between teachers, students and learning. The formation of close bonds between students and teachers extended to renegotiated associations with the practices of schooling and reformulated relationships with learning experienced by students and their teachers. It was at the ‘interface’ between students, teachers and learning that these activations of relationality materialised, in which informality was a central dynamic. From these findings, a set of propositions are generated to centre relational pedagogy as being key to the engagement of young people in meaningful education across schooling and other learning contexts.

Introduction

The pedagogical turn is not something you make; it’s a way you/we are/can be, even when no one is looking. (Lucero 2014, 175)

An effect of the pedagogical turn in educational research over recent years has been the designation of various ‘*pedagogies of...*’ and the focus that these formulations give to increasingly sophisticated understandings of pedagogy. While progressive formulations of pedagogical approaches have included pedagogies of oppression, freedom, liberation and hope (e.g., Freire 2000), more recent designations, including pedagogies of difference (e.g., Giroux 2003; Trifonas 2003), listening (e.g., Low and Sonntag 2013; Smith-Gilman 2018),

resistance (e.g., Kirylo 2013), care (e.g., Noddings 1995), discomfort (e.g., Zembylas 2015), indignation (e.g., Freire 2005), post-indignation (e.g., Hattam and Zembylas 2010) and rage (e.g., Marciniak 2014) are indicative of this bifurcation of the pedagogy concept. Although we suggest that attention *should* be given to the inherent dynamics that these pedagogical formulations have identified, we also contend that within much of the literature, the impulse to name increasingly broader designations of pedagogy may come at the expense of requisite detail, in which the pedagogy concept can obscure the specificity of praxis that such formulations of pedagogy should activate.

There are good reasons for naming new and more complex variations in pedagogy, and while we acknowledge that pedagogical significations ‘recommended by different approaches to teaching can be taken as expressions of the deep politics of these different pedagogies’ (De Lissovoy 2015, 147), we note that a less productive outcome includes stasis of utility for these formulations. Such ‘pedagogies of...’ run the risk of delimiting the transposable possibilities these variations might have beyond the contexts of their specific emergence. As Graff (1994) observed over two decades ago, ‘we are going to see a significant redirection of theoretical attention to issues of education *and pedagogy*’ (65, emphasis added), noting that ‘no topic occurs more frequently than pedagogy as a theme of today’s conferences, symposia, and special issues of journals’ (65). We suggest that further work is required to conceptualise the ‘actually existing’ (Lingard 2007, 246) activations of pedagogy that appear in school settings.

This paper considers the central role of informality defining the relational elements of pedagogy and the implications for reframing learning encounters in schools and other learning sites. We take an approach in this paper that avoids the temptation of naming further ‘pedagogies of...’ to instead examine the dynamics at work *within* existing pedagogies enacted in two distinct alternative learning contexts in Southeast Queensland, Australia—one

centred on the re-engagement of disengaged middle-years students in a public high school—which utilised the repair and restoration of old bicycles as the foundation of a curriculum—and the other, a senior secondary music college, which emphasised the active, creative direction by students of a performing arts curriculum. These learning contexts demonstrated approaches to the development of collaborative and dialogic pedagogical encounters, which prefaced the ‘inter-relationality’ of their participants as being crucial to meaningful learning and teaching encounters. The two activations of relational pedagogy provided in this paper, while arising from alternative learning contexts, provide ‘proof of concept’, which we argue can be applied to other schooling and learning contexts.

To provide initial conceptual grounding, we positioned our considerations of each activation in terms of existing theorisations of ‘pedagogies of relation’ (Aspelin 2014; Bingham and Sidorkin 2004; Ljungblad 2019; Margonis 2007; Sidorkin 2000). As co-facilitators and researchers within these settings, we noted that the literature was scant on explicit detail as to *exactly* what ‘relational’ pedagogies constituted in practice, and how the inter-relational exchanges they implied between teachers and learners might come to be activated. Therefore, our aim in this paper is to respond to this lacuna and to take-up the challenge set by Smyth, McInerney and Fish (2013) to attend to the ‘existential realities’ and relational dimensions invoked by learning and teaching. We contend that it is with the inter-relationality inherent to learning and teaching that useful definitional markers for activating relational pedagogies can be found. Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) argued that ‘education occurs through lived and *living practices* that relate different people to one another’ (52), from which we extend the proposition that the relationality of classroom practice is central to the task of educational praxis, engagement and meaningful learning.

To come to terms with the relational dynamics observed in the two learning contexts, we set about identifying discrete ‘activations’ of relational pedagogy—those moments

captured during our respective fieldwork in each site—which caught our attention as definitive expressions of the pedagogical encounters that were evident. These moments indicated the modalities of relationality, and in an effort to pinpoint something more deliberate regarding the ‘conditions’ inherent to these interactions, we draw on these activations to pose considerations of how these exchanges inculcated specific modes of interpersonal encounter as foundational to the relational pedagogies they invoked.

Upon reflection of these activations and the interactions between teachers, students and learning, we noted that the relationality inherent to each learning context emphasised the formation of ‘close bonds’ between students and students and teachers, which extended to renegotiated associations with the practice of schooling and reformulated relationships with learning experienced by students and their teachers. It was at the interface between students, teachers and learning that these activations of relationality materialised as complex assemblages of interpersonal encounter, enactments of practice and affectively mediated commitments to learning. At this juncture of the close bond between students and teachers, and the renegotiated experiences with schooling and reformulations of learning that proceeded, we note that the formative features of a relational pedagogy unique to each site gained form. Enacted within the wider context of each alternative learning context and the reformulated interpersonal and interactional relationships made possible in these settings, renegotiations of what counts as learning developed as an outcome of the exchanges that occurred as each programme proceeded. It is with consideration of the exchanges that functioned as foundation-points—the primary contexts—of each programme’s enactment, that understandings of the relational dynamic at work in these settings emerged.

Rather than delineate a further ‘pedagogy of...’ in describing these exchanges, this paper attends to the identification of the conditions that marked these moments of interpersonal encounter to uncover something more transposable regarding the pedagogical

relationality evident in each learning context. As one such expression of the conditions inherent to each site, we noted that the enactment of *informality* as a modality of exchange between students and teachers configured the sorts of relationships possible in these sites. Each programme was discernible *in terms of* these enactments of informality, with informality standing as a way of ‘acting, speaking and being that the students exhibited in their everyday interactions but that had previously marked their experience of schooling as traumatic’ (Hickey et al. 2020, 46). Informality reconfigured the relational interface in these settings as notably different to those previously encountered by the students in their negotiations with the ‘regular’ sites of school and worked to establish the pedagogical dynamic through which learning was experienced in these alternative learning contexts. In referring to this general understanding of the ‘regular’ school, we acknowledge Slee’s (2011) suggestion that the term is problematic because it implies a sense of normality within which ‘there must be normal or regular students for whom these schools exist’ (12). We suggest a slight inflection of this meaning to instead argue that the use of the term ‘regular’ resonated with the students’ experiences of the classrooms from which they had disengaged.

That these markers of the encounters possible in these settings were identifiable and distinct from other prevailing expressions of schooling is notable, and we turn attention in the latter sections of this paper towards a consideration of the ways in which schooling, and existing formulations of formality and learning, might be reconsidered in light of relational approaches to pedagogy, which emphasise informality as an effective modality of pedagogical interaction.

Foundations of relational pedagogy

Relationality has emerged in recent years as a focus in wider considerations of pedagogy (Ford 2019). Although evident in classical accounts of education and schooling (e.g., Dewey

1929; Dewey and Bentley 1949; Freire 1970; Rancière 1985), the scholarship of Sidorkin (2000), Bingham and Sidorkin (2004), Margonis (2007), Aspelin (2014) and Ljungblad (2019) has outlined more recent applications of the concept and delineations of the intellectual currents from which this ‘turn’ to the relational draws. In a useful summary of this body of work, Ljungblad (2019) observed that pedagogical relationality is ‘ontologically based on the idea that people share a social living space with other people’ (4). Following Biesta’s (2019) assertion that education ‘always implies a relationship’ (39), Ljungblad (2019) noted that the conceptualisation of pedagogy *as* relational offers a ‘third pathway of seeing education’, one that shifts the focus ‘from individuals, groups and their practices *onto relationships*’ (4, emphasis added). Margonis (2007) extended this line of reasoning, with the claim that ‘humans are collective beings, whose abilities to learn and think and act are developed most powerfully when they are positioned within intersubjective spaces’ (65). Particularly in this current context, in which education is largely framed in terms of the metrication of arbitrary designations of success—typically pre-figured by ‘globalising educational accountabilities’ and attendant ‘testing regimes’ that Lingard et al. (2013) identified—relational conceptions of education that instead position the *encounter* between students and teachers as being fundamental for learning emerge as crucial, albeit alternative, conceptions of how education might be imagined.

Unclear in recent articulations of relational pedagogy is the precise nature of the ‘conditions’ of these relational exchanges and the ways in which different forms of relationality come to feature as expressions of the varying associations between individuals set *within* the context of learning. It is with these practical considerations that we suggest further attention is required to understand what constitutes the ‘relation’ within relational pedagogy. Greater understanding of how learners and teachers come *into* relation as part of the learning exchange, and then proceed to maintain these relationships as central to the

enactment of education, is required to uncover the effects of different forms of relationality on learning. To configure a sense of how learners and teachers encounter each other and the spaces within which learning proceeds, we argue that consideration of the ‘conditions’ that contextualise the relational dynamic is required.

Three fundamental vectors are implied in pedagogical relations: relations between students, relations between students and teachers, and relations between students, teachers and spaces of learning. The interactions between these three elements are iterative and are also suggestive of wider circles of relationality, such as relations that students and teachers have within the private contexts of the home, peer networks, and wider socioeconomic circumstances, which position students and teachers in particular ways. It is with these three fundamental relations that something indicative can be extrapolated *in-the-moment* regarding what it means to be pedagogically ‘in-relation’ and how learning proceeds as an outcome of the exchanges that students and teachers might then enact.

Biesta (2004) casted this moment as ‘the in-between’, in which meaning is created through ‘participation, coordination, co-construction and transformation’ (17). In taking this notion further, we seek to invoke the active nature of these moments as ‘encounters’ or ‘exchanges’ between teachers and learners, in which the in-betweenness of relational pedagogy is based on acts of reciprocity, which require mutuality and trust. The exchange—mediated via the dialogic encounter of in-relation beings—situates a sense of the ‘activation’ of the relationship, through which the relationship is marked as identifiable. It is at the interface of the exchange between students, students and teachers and students, teachers and the site of learning that education occurs. In doing so, traditional classroom power structures, in which teachers transmit knowledge to students, are broken apart to create opportunities for relational trust (Smyth et al. 2013). What it means to be pedagogically in-relation emerges,

wherein the conditions of the exchange activate certain relationalities as expressive of the situation and those individuals engaged.

Two activations: Bike Build and Music Industry College

The two cases presented here were conducted under the remit of wider, specialised alternative learning programmes, which emphasised the development of the interpersonal dynamics between the students and students and their teachers. Relationships stood out as a core factor, with school leadership and staff regularly using this word to define the programmes and the objectives to which they were oriented. For instance, Bike Build emphasised the reformation of relationships as being crucial to the re-engagement of its group of ‘at risk’ students. For many of the participating students, Bike Build constituted a last chance for remaining at school, with the careful rebuilding of relationships between students and the students and their teachers an important focus of the programme. Similarly, Music Industry College had a strong ethic of care and reciprocal relationality, which sat at the heart of the school’s daily life and practices (Riddle and Cleaver 2017). The engagement of young people in meaningful curriculum activities, which were linked to their lifeworlds and passion for music, was supported by close bonds with teachers and other students—not as an ‘add-on’, but as a core pedagogical value within the school.

These two activations provide opportunities and insights to explore the conditions inherent to relational pedagogies. The following discussion charts these conditions and the provocations they provided for certain forms of inter-relational exchange in each site. In an effort to outline a sense of the dynamics of relationality at work in these situations, a typology of relationality that corresponds with the markers drawn from these case examples is posed below.

Activation 1: Bike Build and the discovery of expertise

Bike Build sat within a wider suite of alternative learning programmes offered by its host public high school. Formulated around the repair and restoration of old bicycles, Bike Build used the novelty of the bicycles as a prompt for nurturing a sense of mutuality, respect and trust between participants and as a foundation for rebuilding relationships to school and learning. Rather than replicate further iterations of those same formations of schooling from which the students had disengaged, Bike Build was convened under markedly different conditions. Convened in a large, open workshop facility adjoining the main campus of the school, Bike Build emphasised kinaesthetic modes of learning, and importantly, attempted to open space—physically and symbolically—for the participating students to lead the direction of the programme and to try different ways of activating learning.

While we suggest that there is nothing remarkable about using bicycles as a prompt for an alternative learning programme, the novelty of bicycles-as-curriculum captured the students' imagination. In this regard, our approach aligned with that detailed by Ivinson (2012), whereby the bicycles provided an opportunity for initial engagement and the prospect for the students to demonstrate that they did in fact have *expertise*; a theme that became crucial in identifying the forms of relationality possible in this programme. It emerged that the bicycles were something that the students *knew*, with Bike Build offering opportunities for the students to demonstrate different forms of knowledge—*their* knowledge—and to engage in the process of sharing and negotiating the way that learning might be performed. The bundle of existing relationships and fraught encounters that marked the experience of the regular spaces of the school were reset in this programme, and consequently, the students, albeit tentatively at first, tried on new ways of being that drew upon these far more personally pertinent ways of knowing.

Expressions of the students' expertise did not take long to emerge. From as early as Week 2 of the programme (i.e., the first substantive week of hands-on activity following an initial session dedicated to introductions and the identification of the programme's purpose and goals), several students made a point of relaying that they held expertise in mechanical repair; as one student identified, 'I have worked with my dad on fixing the car' and another, experience in 'fixing my brother's bike'. This prospect for the students to engage in activities for which they felt familiarity was fundamental to the programme. The effect that this had in opening opportunities for engaging with the students and exploring why it was that the students felt school was not working for them, emerged as a profound aspect of the programme. One prominent example included the experience of 'Cody', a student who came to Bike Build withdrawn and socially anxious. Cody had been streamed into the programme after retaliating against instances of bullying, later reporting that he generally felt withdrawn and disengaged from school.

Cody expressed a capability in mechanical repair early-on in the programme, and accordingly, as the weeks progressed, proceeded to participate actively in the repair of *his* bicycle. But he remained 'shy' and somewhat 'distant' for the first few weeks of the programme. It emerged that Cody maintained skills in bicycle repair—particularly the rebuilding and setting of wheel bearings (a complex task)—but it took significant coaxing and encouragement before he would speak about how he developed these skills and acknowledge that he might hold expertise in this aspect of bicycle repair.

It was noted during the specific workshop session dedicated to this phase of the repair of the bicycles—a session that occurred in Week 4 of the 10-week programme—that Cody took particular interest in the activity and began to engage further with his peers. It had happened that the students had decided in Week 1 to work in small groups of 3–4, and within Cody's group his fellow students had commented on his skills in setting bearings. This was

transformative. Cody felt validated and slowly began to field questions and advise his workgroup on how to best set the wheel bearings; including discussing complex processes including wheel roll-out and the correct tension needed to fasten the retaining nuts of the wheel hub. In short, *Cody took the lead on this activity*. This was a major turning point for a student who previously would barely speak.

In Week 7, Cody was prompted to provide a demonstration to the whole group on the processes involved in this task. Some of the students had encountered difficulty with this aspect of the rebuild of their bicycles, and in an attempt to prompt a generative theme, which might lead to further engagement across the cohort, Cody was encouraged to provide a demonstration of how he undertakes the process, and to then liaise with each group to advise and ‘sign off’ on the repair of the wheels. Initially reluctant, Cody did provide a step-by-step demonstration to the cohort, and proceeded to check-in with each student to ensure that each wheel was set appropriately. There was significant responsibility attached to this; Cody was well aware that a poorly adjusted wheel could result in hub failure and an accident should the bike be ridden. However, he took on this responsibility, and consequently became known as an expert by the students for this expertise. Notably, Cody consequently began to interact far more actively, voiced opinions on the direction of the repair of the bicycles and began to talk and engage with his peers.

Activation 2: Music Industry College as a relational school

Music Industry College is an alternative senior secondary college in Brisbane, which uses music as a magnet to engage disenfranchised young people in schooling (Cleaver and Riddle 2014). The school is premised on building relationships, with this ethic infusing its formal curriculum, extra-curricular activities, community and social fabric. The staff and students at Music Industry College are committed to doing ‘the relational and affective work of building

a rich learning community, as well as the commitment to democratic civic life within and beyond the school' (Riddle and Cleaver 2017, 39).

There was a persistent demonstration of an ethic of care and the commitment to engage with young people in meaningful education that connects to community and culture (Riddle and Cleaver 2017). Smyth et al. (2013) described the notion of the *relational school* being one in which emphasis is given to relational trust and power; this was evidenced at Music Industry College through the care, respect and reciprocity that students and staff showed each other (Riddle and Cleaver 2017). The relational geographies— affective, material and spatial (Kraftl 2013)—of the school were a key factor to its success. One student described the focus on relationality in the 'teacher–student relationship' as making the difference because 'it's kind of more like a person–person relationship than a teacher–student relationship'. The power imbalance that is present within classrooms was reduced or removed through the nurturing of relationships and the commitment to a culture of reciprocity by the learners and teachers at the school.

Informality plays a central role in the cultural makeup of Music Industry College, including relaxed school policies on uniform, school times and classroom structures, referring to teachers by their first names and regular 'family chats' as a school cohort, in which students have an equal voice and are able to participate in direct democratic action as part of the school's development of policies and procedures (Riddle and Cleaver 2015, 2017). Another student explained that they felt like they were treated as an adult: 'It didn't feel like we were rocking up to a school to be disciplined and chastised ... it was weird coming from a school where I was being sent home for having hair too long'.

Music Industry College provides a counterpoint to the prevailing discourse of schools as failing and of young people being 'at risk'. The importance of informality, relationality and an ethic of care, trust and respect cannot be understated. Music Industry College

demonstrates that it is possible to re-engage disenfranchised young people in meaningful education through relational pedagogies that have the capacity to reimagine education in more socially just and counter-hegemonic ways (Riddle and Cleaver 2015, 2017).

Discussion

We make the point in light of these examples of relational pedagogy that ‘it is through pedagogies that education gets done’ (Lingard 2007, 247), although learning happens in a variety of ways, according to the conditions inherent to the situation within which it proceeds. As our two examples have demonstrated, by opening the possibility for different expressions of knowledge and expertise, different ways of engaging *and* learning were activated. However, what remained crucial to each example was the relational nature of learning. The exchanges were mediated in these terms, with the conditions established in these moments shaping the forms of interaction that followed. In the process of reconfiguring the expected relationships to schooling that the students in the two activations shared above had otherwise experienced (e.g., relationships that had been predominantly alienating and traumatic), different interactional exchanges were made possible, which opened new opportunities for learning via reconstituted interpersonal encounter.

With consideration of pedagogy as ‘an ongoing practical accomplishment’ (Freebody and Freiberg 2011, 80), we set about considering what was core to these moments. What *in particular* was at work within these instances that allowed for these renewed inter-relationships and enactments of learning? Lusted’s (1986) pertinent formulation of pedagogy as the coalescence of students and teachers engaged-in the process of producing knowledge informed the broad dimensions of this formulation, although it was with a more nuanced conceptualisation of the nature of these interactions and how they proceeded as mediations of the conditions inherent to these settings, that our attention turned. We suggest that three

elements were inherent to the conditions evident in each activation, which provide a means for considering relationality as a modality of the pedagogical exchanges evident in each site: close bonds, renegotiated associations of the ‘interface’ and ‘exchange’, and reformulated encounters with learning through informality as a modality of relational pedagogy.

Close bonds

Crucial to the exchanges witnessed in each learning context were ‘certain forms of intentioned and sociable interaction that valued open declarations of personal feeling, a commitment from educators to *care* ... and an emphasis on the nurturance of positive personal growth among student cohorts’ (Hickey et al. 2020, 45). It was with the bonds that were able to form between students and teachers in these moments of mutuality that conditions conducive to dialogue and inquiry emerged. The formation of these close bonds derived from the activation of collaborative approaches to negotiating the curriculum, and the recognition of individual practical accomplishments. It was from the formation of these close bonds that demonstrations of expertise crucial to the mediation of learning were also made possible.

At stake in the formation of these close bonds was the establishment of certain modes of convivial interaction. To explain these, we draw from Gee’s (2004) conceptualisation of the formation of ‘affinity spaces’, and more specifically, the enactment of a mutually identified common endeavour, which was shaped by the active input of the participants in the design and conduct of each learning context. The capacity for the students to ‘own’ their learning was important for the participation that followed, but perhaps more important were the subsequent demonstrations of the knowledge held by the students (i.e., tacit knowledge in Gee’s terms). This capacity to demonstrate knowledge opened possibilities for the display of expertise, which had rarely been recognised in the students’ previous encounters with school.

The ‘highly scripted’ (Ede 2006) encounters with schooling that otherwise marked the students’ experiences were challenged in these settings, and consequently space was opened for the students to identify and demonstrate expertise and learning within reformulated networks of affinity. A point noted by Gee (2004) resonates: ‘It is instructive to compare affinity spaces to the sorts of spaces that are typical in schools, which usually do not have the features of affinity spaces’ (75).

Renegotiated associations: The ‘interface’ and ‘exchange’

The interactions that emerged from these reformulations of the sites of learning provoked an affinity among participants as an outcome of the possible relational exchanges. It was at the interface of the participants in-relation to each other that these close bonds found specific activation. Of particular interest were the range of pre-existing interpersonal relationships that accompanied the students into each programme. While perhaps unsurprising—schools are sites of socialisation within which different interpersonal arrangements take effect and gain symbolic meaning as ‘orders’ of the setting—the possibility that these learning contexts opened for generating new forms of inter-relationships provoked the reformation of existing relational structures. For example, Cody’s interactions with his peers while setting wheel bearings and the ethos of care evident in the teachers and students at Music Industry College stand as indicative of these reformed relationships.

We do not claim that these sessions were without tension and conflict and it would be naïve to suggest that such situations of human interaction could be entirely free of such traits. However, the significance of the relationships core to the activations evident in Bike Build and at Music Industry College opened *new* and *different* forms of interaction, mediated at the moment of the interpersonal exchange—at the interface of beings-in-relation. Reconfiguring the formulations of relationships between students, students and teachers and students,

teachers and the site of the school, provided opportunities for the demonstration of forms of mutuality and interaction that had otherwise been submerged. This then provoked reformulated interactions between participants, and with it the recognition of capability, knowledge and expertise, which in turn brought students and teachers together in different ways. Altering the conditions within which interpersonal exchanges proceeded opened the possibility for reformulated interpersonal encounters.

Reformulated encounters with learning: The workings of informality

These interactions also drew upon new modalities of exchange between participants, and it was with how these exchanges were mediated that a significant aspect of the relationality evident in each site gained form. These modalities of exchange were markedly different to those the students reported having otherwise encountered within regular school sites. Ways of speaking, of expressing opinion, of moving about and using space; these new modalities of activating inter-relational exchanges signified reformulated enactments of interaction that drew marked differences to what is normally expected in regular classroom settings. We framed these sorts of interactions in terms of the informality that defined the nature of each site and the modalities of interaction that this informality broached.

Informality provided a useful conceptual expression of the sorts of inter-relationships that came to be activated at each site. Beyond the productively disorienting nature of the spatiality and physical arrangement of each site as very different sites of learning, the capacity for students to meaningfully determine the curriculum of each programme and establish the terms by which they would be conducted provoked the sense of informality that came to permeate each learning environment. The usual cues that defined the ‘ritualised’ (McLaren 1999) performances of the regular classroom were challenged. These informally mediated expressions of interaction, physical activity, material usage, instruments and tools

encouraged dialogue and modes of negotiation that were impulsive, of-the-moment and somewhat free of the strictures of the formal, reserved decorum that the students had identified as typical of the regular spaces of schooling. That these impulsive, active expressions of interaction also happened to be the same forms of expression that landed the students *in* these alternative learning contexts to begin with was notable, and further emphasised the point that informality can indeed be productive—if recognised as an opening for creativity—and does not always lend itself to chaos. Instead, informality surfaced as a generative modality of productive interaction and gave credence to the ways of acting, speaking and being that students exhibited in their everyday interactions but had previously marked their experience of schooling as traumatic.

Conclusion

Sidorkin (2000) considered the pragmatic imperatives of a pedagogy of relation, noting ‘if we can get teachers to pay attention to relations rather than behaviours, it will be a step forward’ (4). We are interested in how a relational pedagogy might achieve practical outcomes within educational contexts, accounting for the deliberate, interpersonal and contextually bound conditions within which such practices are activated. Rather than following an impulse for the naming of ever more complex and defined ‘pedagogies of...’, a closer examination of what marks the internal dynamics of pedagogies that preface relationality and the nurturing of relationships are required to situate more deliberate sets of pedagogical practice.

In this paper, we have considered the conditions under which relationships crucial to learning come to be activated within two learning contexts. While these particular contexts occurred outside of the framing of regular schooling (Slee 2011), we suggest that relational pedagogical encounters can occur in any educational setting, including more traditional classroom environments. Along with Edwards-Groves et al. (2010), we contend that

attendance to the relational aspects of learning and teaching is essential for educational purpose and agency, which sit at the heart of meaningful engagement with schooling. An effective relational pedagogy is built upon participatory interaction and the negotiation of curriculum, in which the endorsement of informal ways of being and doing further mark a relational pedagogical dynamic—one which gives focus to the development of affinity between participants and the cognisant recognition of expertise. In much the same way that Hattam and Zembylas (2010) positioned an ethic of conviviality, we suggest that a relational pedagogy offers an effective means for learning ‘even when no one is looking’ (Lucero 2014, 175).

We contend that closer attendance to relationality within classrooms and other formal and informal sites of learning will enable teachers to provide rich environments that support the formation of deeper connections between learners, teachers and curriculum. The participatory ethic of a relational pedagogy urges participants towards new ways of being in-relation, including to seriously consider what it means to learn mutually, in dialogue and with cognisance of the effects of the conditions within which these interactions proceed. Through the examples provided in this paper, we have demonstrated the potential of relational pedagogy, in which informality can operate as a productive modality to activate inclusive, socially just learning opportunities for all students.

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