

Relational pedagogy and the policy failure of contemporary Australian schooling: Activist teaching and pedagogically driven reform

ACCEPTED VERSION

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This paper considers the implications of the current landscape of education policy reform in Australian schooling. We argue that the decontextualisation of education policy enactments and the eschewing of concerns relevant at the local level of the school over the past two decades have prompted various reform agendas to fail. We contend that recognition of the deep contextualisation of schools is paramount in any attempt at renewal. Therefore, it is at the local school-level that reform agendas can and should be directed by the pedagogical and innovative work of educators. We focus on ‘relational pedagogy’ because it offers opportunities to enact school-wide reform and enhance the professional capacities of educators as pedagogical innovators. Contemporary education reform agendas are best situated and registered within school sites and relational pedagogy stands as a deeply contextualised provocation for enacting school renewal.

relational pedagogy; teacher activism; educational reform; educational policy

Introduction

The pedagogy of relation will not necessarily solve the problems of inequality and prejudice that plague our schools. However, we need to move from struggling against something to struggling for something. (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, pp. 6)

The extension of ‘neoliberal reformation’ of the social-economic sphere (Giroux, 2005, 2015; Harvey, 2005) has culminated in a troubling ‘universe’ (Connell, 2013, p. 285) over the past two decades of educational reform in Australia. This has eroded socially just teacher practices and professionalism because ‘contrary to the rhetoric of “evidence-based policy”, neoliberal policy-making proceeds *as if it already knows the answer* to policy problems’ (Connell, 2013, p. 284). Consequently, teachers have become increasingly ‘constrained in their own freedom and agency (Edwards-Groves et al., 2010, p. 46) and ‘closely scrutinised and monitored’ (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 311). This is due to ‘expanded markets, more competition, more flexibility, more entrepreneurialism and more private ownership, (Connell,

2013, p. 285), which are ‘antithetical to the inclusive character of educational relationships’ (Connell, 2013b, p. 106).

In contrast, we advocate that a relational approach based on activist teacher professionalism (Sachs, 2003) and ‘a politics of engagement’ (Gale & Densmore, 2003, p. 2) should be the driver of school reform initiatives. It is *within* school sites where ‘deep contextualisation’, registered in school settings, provides a valuable foundation-point for shaping pedagogically driven whole-school reform (e.g., Bigum & Rowan, 2009; Gale et al., 2017; Hattam & Prosser, 2008; Hayes et al., 2017).

The current landscape of national schooling policy has limited socially just localised reform agendas of pedagogical innovation because, as Christensen and Karp (2004, p. 3) explained, ‘schools have never been just about educating children but also about constructing social and political power’. Further, ‘real school reform must be about challenging it’ with ‘political will and vision to put social justice at the heart of the debate [otherwise] school reform will continue to be an exasperating tug of war with limited impact on the status quo’ (Christensen & Karp, 2004, p. 3)

Sachs (2016) asked ‘why are we still talking about teacher professionalism?’ (p. 4) more than a decade after her manifesto, *The Activist Teaching Profession* (Sachs, 2003). She argued that a new approach to teaching professionalism ‘requires that teachers collectively and individually address those in power to make it clear that a top-down approach is simply not working, nor, in principle, is it likely to work’ (Sachs, 2016, p. 4). We contend in this paper therefore for more complex and critical accounts of the contours of current decontextualised national policy agendas underlying reform mandates and the regulation of teachers’ work. We also advocate and provide examples of school-based, contextually *realist* pedagogical reform initiatives that can be made possible by their identification, description and being understood as hopeful responses to the totalising impact of the current policy

landscape. Throughout the remainder of this paper we elaborate on these valuable foundations by: first, reframing the reform agenda; second, discussing the implications for reform in Australian schools; and third, advancing the enactment of ‘relational pedagogy’. This is school-based, contextually realist and student-centred reform in place of the decontextualised policy agenda presently dominating teachers’ professional work.

Reframing the reform agenda

Biesta (2017) argued that ‘the decline of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberal forms of governing and governance’ (p. 328) have transformed and defined education policies in places such as Australia, the US and UK, into what Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) described as ‘hyper-rationalised policies, over-elaborated administrative systems and highly regimented teaching programmes’ (p. 46). Under a performative logic narrowly defined by rationalisation and accountability, effectiveness and renewal have become conflated with market values (Brass & Holloway, 2019), which has culminated in ‘privatisation, individualisation, competition, choice, devolution of responsibility, the user-pays ideology and self-management’ (Smyth, 2016, p. 314). What counts under this logic is only that which can be counted, and the success of schools being determined in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and process (Biesta, 2016). Thrupp and Lupton (2006) argued for careful consideration of the context and the specificity of individual school sites, which have largely been removed from policy deliberations, thereby generating a non-distinctive school (p. 311). Apart from the establishment of peculiar formations of bureaucratic oversight and surveillance of schools, these contexts and cultures of compliance also establish the terrain of contemporary teachers’ work in which the capacity of teachers *to teach* as professionals, becomes reduced to narrowly prefigured conceptions of what counts. Even more worrying is the responsibility that teachers are expected to assume and ensure in the delivery of mandated curricula. A

peculiar feature of current reform agendas is the devolution of teachers' professional practice to enact approaches to teaching that might respond to the embedded needs of students and 'situated' peculiarities of schools, while accountability measures to deploy the edicts of centrally mandated curricula are imposed and monitored.

Given the system-wide failure of these prevailing policy mandates (e.g., Gonski, 2019; Parliament of Australia, 2014), we argue that there needs to be urgent reconsideration of the decontextualised, top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to educational policymaking in Australia (Perryman et al., 2011). We propose that it is within the relational domain of teachers' work that sustainable schooling reform might commence at the level of the individual school. It is here where the *immediate*, the *contextual* and the *local* day-to-day work of teachers and students generates new possibilities for school reform. The relationship between teacher, student and knowledge evolves as the primary 'site' of learning from which the contextualised realities of the experience of schooling become apparent, negotiated and grounded. Connell (2013) contended that the wealth of contextual teacher knowledge and expertise is largely glossed over in official policy reforms:

In fact, we know quite a lot about how things go in education. There is excellent school ethnography, and illuminating research on teachers' lives and practices, and a good deal of statistical knowledge about school populations; we know a lot about how ethnic differences and tensions play out, how working-class families experience education, about the situation of Aboriginal children, and so on. Broadly, we know how to make schools work even in environments of poverty: build up local experience, develop relevant curricula, create social solidarity and mutual help, put in serious resources. *This is not an ill-researched field. But all this work counts for nothing in major educational policy-making.* (p. 284; emphasis added)

The dialogic and embodied encounter (Lingard, 2007) between teachers and students represents the 'ground zero' of education, in which education gets 'done' and where students and teachers establish the conditions for learning. The dialogic and embodied pedagogical

encounter gives shape and form to hopeful reform agendas that remain realist in their concern for student learning, while being centred on the material realities confronting schools, teachers and students today.

Policy implications for reform in Australian schools

Current reform agendas in Australian schools exert the dual effect of eschewing considerations of the deep contextualisation that define individual school sites, while reformulating instrumentalist ‘performative truths’, which establish the ‘ordinary everyday life and work’ (Ball, 2015, p. 1129) of educators. Extending this point, Connell (2009) referred to the insistent effects of audit cultures and accountability frameworks that have constrained teachers’ work and reduced teaching to discrete sets of codified practice, which simultaneously ignore the complexities of teaching as an emplaced, embodied and relational practice. Denying the deep contextualisation that education operates within masks and obscures the material realities that confront teachers and students in the day-to-day enactment of learning, while reducing possibilities for an emplaced, responsive and transformative pedagogy that accounts for the contextual characteristics of the school.

Through mediations of ‘what’ should be learned—enacted through the formulation of nationally mandated curricula and assessment frameworks and the delegation of highly scripted forms of pedagogy, which are ritualised forms of practice that disavow the unique and singular character of classrooms and the creative instincts of teachers and students—standardised versions of ‘good’ teaching, ‘good’ schooling and ‘good’ learning have surfaced in chorus with regimen of national testing, school performance criteria, league tables and effectiveness rankings. However, the policy transformation of schooling over the past two decades has fundamentally failed to deliver on its claims for improvement. However, the response has not been to return to teachers the capacity to make decisions on how best to

teach, but to further pursue agendas of centralisation, testing and compliance, which exacerbates the claimed need for further policy mandates that ‘take control’ over what is taught.

Two effects of this transformation are evident. First is the turn toward a ‘new professionalism’ (Evetts, 2009, 2012) of schooling and the transformation of the work of teachers, which positions managerialism and technocratic approaches as the most effective ways to ensure teacher performance, learning and school success. Teachers are reduced to ‘operating only within *authorized* teaching methods’ (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998a, p. 9). However, such a regime concomitantly cedes teachers’ professional authority to ‘new policy networks that often discredit and circumvent’ (Brass & Holloway, 2019, p. 4) teachers’ capacity to *actually* teach. Through the invocation of languages, practices, partnerships and funding streams that undermine teachers’ capacities for professional judgement and authority as educators, reframed accountability measures reduce local school matters to be largely irrelevant or outside of the scope of wider systemic concerns. For teachers, increasingly refined pedagogic approaches that are simultaneously prone to high levels of surveillance impose a climate of professional distrust (McGregor & Mills, 2014), which creates a situation in which the professional capital of teachers is regarded as questionable and consequently requiring of scrutiny. This inverse logic establishes the conditions of its own mediation at the expense of the professionalism of teachers and the capacity for schools to determine the best ways to educate their students.

A second, related consequence corresponds with the value of local knowledge to the conduct of schooling. At the same time that national policy agendas position the work of teachers in limited ways, the value of local, contextualised knowledge is also called into question. Myran (2018) identified that one of the factors that contributes to the disembedding of community knowledges in schools is ‘an overreliance on knowledge dissemination models

that externalise sources of knowledge and overlook local resources’ (p. 116). The rich funds of knowledge of young people and their communities (e.g., Moll et al., 1992; Zipin et al., 2012) are simply left aside. At best, benign decontextualisation of learning from the communities and settings within which it is enacted has the effect of separating the purpose of education from students’ and teachers’ immediate experiences, in which the symbolic violence of imposed, decontextualised and disembedded curricula provide the foundation for a modality of learning decoupled and remote from the everyday concerns and needs of students. At worst, this form of policy mandate represents the expression of a political imperative to disavow the legitimacy of community knowledges and the experiences of students (e.g., Dewey, 1997), in which the material realities of day-to-day encounters are denied value as meaningful prompts for learning and critical scrutiny. The challenge is how to address the deep contextualisation of teaching and learning as a primary focus of schooling within an existing policy landscape that restricts the possibility of teachers to design and implement responsive teaching and students to encounter modes of learning that respond to the contextualised realities of their experiences and cultural and linguistic resources.

In response to this situation, Bigum and Rowan (2009) argued that one way to disrupt the existing formation of schooling was to examine ‘the question of the relationships fostered within schooling more broadly’ (p. 105). Further, Hattam and Prosser (2008) observed that ‘no amount of restructuring and/or reculturing that is *not* driven by a concern for the pedagogical relationship will make a sustainable difference to learning outcomes’ (p. 90). These views provide a useful cue for considering how school reform agendas might be more effectively enacted at the local level of the school. We assert—following Bigum and Rowan (2009) and Hattam and Prosser (2008)—that school-wide renewal and transformation must commence at the pedagogical level. Further, it is at the *interface* between the student and teacher and knowledge that profound understandings of the material conditions that define

the school context and the modalities of student learning and teacher expertise can be uncovered to provide the foundation of meaningful and sustainable reform agendas.

There has been substantial research into the importance of socially just relationships between teachers and students (e.g., Comber & Kamler, 2004; Connell, 1993; Hattam & Zipin, 2009; Hayes et al., 2009), although further consideration is required regarding how the pedagogical relationship is foundational to school-wide reform agendas. The dynamics inherent to the teacher–student relationship, what makes them pedagogical and how they might be positioned to produce and reproduce socially just patterns for teaching and learning as the foundation of school-wide reform agendas require further explication to identify different modalities of being-in-relation, including how these speak to the broader contexts of the school as a complex system. While we agree that teacher–student pedagogical relationships provide a key site for productive school reform initiatives, it is specifically with recognition of the ‘deep contextualisation’ of day-to-day exchanges between teachers and students that a school-focused and learning-oriented reform agenda might proceed that remains inclusive to all. In the next section, we explain in more detail what we mean by an alternative participatory relational approach and share school examples where this has been experienced in recent times.

Relational pedagogy and deep contextualisation

A relational pedagogy (e.g., Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Edwards-Groves et al., 2010; Ljungblad, 2019; Sellar, 2012) emphasises the dynamic of *being-in-relation* and constitutes the encounter between teachers and students engaged in learning (Lusted, 1986). A relational pedagogy treats the ordinary, day-to-day encounters between teachers and students as pivotal moments in the pedagogical act. It is within these encounters that teachers can reframe the focus of learning on the formation of ‘positive relationships rather than punitive behaviour

management that can be demeaning for young people' (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 1041).

Further, such encounters tender proactive engagements between teachers and students, which are aimed at nurturing rich and meaningful interpersonal exchanges to shape experiences of learning. Accordingly, recognition that 'the pedagogical relation is complex and ... signifies also a process of self-development and self-understanding for the adult' (Van Manen, 2016, p. 17) challenges existing views of hierarchical pedagogical interactions, which focus solely on the transformation of the student, in which the relationship between teachers and students 'is a form of institutionalized domination and subordination' (Waller, 1932, p. 195).

Relational pedagogy actively resists the normalising effects of what Lingard (2007) framed as 'dominant actually occurring pedagogies' (p. 246) to provoke recognition of the idiosyncratic, *in-the-moment* character of the pedagogical encounter. A relational pedagogy corresponds with the recognition of the relationships that teachers and students form in the moment of the encounter and the immediate and contextualised possibilities for learning that emerge under these conditions.

Central to this relationship is the recognition of the deep contextualisation that teachers and students encounter. Teachers, students and schools are situated, historied and emplaced entities, which carry complex sociations of experiences and past encounters that inflect the contours of learning and the immediacy of the teacher–student relationship. Working from a relational perspective means recognising this complexity and taking time to establish the parameters of the relationship and the contextual dynamics that influence the encounter and the learning that proceeds. However, it remains that this capacity to invest time in the meaningful nurturance of relationships is at a premium under current formulations of schooling, with existing formations of high stakes learning in schools regimenting the available time teachers and students have to 'simply' interact. There are some resonances in

the current context to how Waller (1932) described the hostility of schooling systems to young people's lives.

Hickey et al. (2020) argued that such moments can be characterised in terms of the informality they offer. Opportunistic moments of informal encounter open particular possibilities for engaging with students in ways that are unexpected and that diverge from formal modalities of interaction, which otherwise define contemporary schooling. Citing how informal moments of exchange—unexpected moments of encounter that proceed beyond the edicts typically regimented in schools—provided an effective means for repairing relationships between students and teachers in one high-poverty alternative education context, Hickey et al. (2020) illustrated how this enactment of informality extended space for meaningful learning and student engagement. They noted that the informality of unexpected student-teacher encounters afforded opportunities that otherwise were not available in the routine functioning of the school. This suggests that broadening conceptions of the range of inter-relationships that are otherwise possible in schools provides the means for establishing new formulations of the teacher–student relationship (Hickey et al., 2020). However, these reparative approaches to relationships require substantial *presence*, which is an ‘elusive but vital quality’ on the part of teachers (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266).

Riddle and Cleaver's (2017) research on the activation of alternative music curricula drew similar conclusions and via their analysis of the pedagogical implications that derive from the active inclusion of student decision-making in defining curricula goals and the conversations that subsequently emerged between students and teachers, highlighted how space was opened for the enactment of more meaningful teacher–student relationships (e.g., Shor, 1994, 1996).

It remains that these examples derive from alternative learning settings where space and time was provided to nurture different formations of relationship. But even within the

routine of highly structured schooling, the building of strong relationships—banal and profound—is possible and can be activated. We take Groundwater-Smith and Sachs’ (2002) consideration of school hierarchies as an indication of where these possibilities might be located:

Those at the top of the ‘food chain’ are expected to develop the policies of the ‘Regulatory State’ and are often engaged to do so within the terms of their performance contracts. They are essentially reactive to government policies, with few spaces in which they can negotiate and modify. They manage the various crises that the regulatory state engenders. *Moving down the chain the boundaries of what might or might not be done become more permeable, with the possibility for greater resistance and reinvention.* (p. 342; emphasis added)

Education is enacted at the interface of teacher and student in specific and unique contexts. It follows that it is at this level that meaningful work can be performed to build relationships and to enact school-wide reform. The challenge for teachers is to create and sustain these moments of inter-relationality within a bureaucratic landscape that otherwise seeks to reduce this capacity. Sachs’ (2001) argued almost two decades ago for an ethic of teacher ‘activism’, in which the relational dynamic between teacher and student is enacted according to frames of relationality brought by teachers and students. Establishing the conditions through which modalities of dialogue and encounter might meaningfully open opportunity for nurturing different ranges of relationship, the activism implied by Sachs (2001) commences as a form of exchange: the determination of a specific form of relational encounter from which a pedagogical purpose can be defined. Noting that ‘positive teacher–student relationships [provide] an open communication as well as emotional and academic support’ (Yunus et al., 2011, p. 2635) and that an ethic of ‘mutual acceptance, understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation’ (Yunus et al., 2011, p. 2635) could emerge from such an intentioned and purposeful relationality; a foundational *ethics* of this expression of relational

pedagogy thus emerges. To further illustrate, we propose that the following elements are essential for relational pedagogy:

- (1) A relational pedagogy emphasises cognition of the dynamic of being-in-relation and that learning is enacted in the moment of the relational exchange through attendance to *presence* (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Understanding the dynamic of the pedagogical exchange hence requires understandings of the school environment, including how pedagogic interactions are contextually framed. A pedagogy of being-in-relation is responsive to the moment of the encounter and consequently draws upon the consideration of ‘site’ of enactment of this relationality. A sustainable relational pedagogy seeks to identify and activate moments of relational exchange in accordance with the material realities of the school context.
- (2) A relational pedagogy is possible within the day-to-day routine of schooling, yet requires cognisance of the limitations that bureaucratised, routinised and ordered school systems apply. For new types of relationships between teachers and students to form, a relational pedagogy requires ‘an improvisational character’ (Van Manen, 2016, p. 18) to negotiate ways of being-in-relation, which is premised on identifying and creating space within the school context for these relations to form. Further, the de-institutionalisation of relationships enables the removal of bureaucratic and impersonal barriers to relationships (Osterman, 2000).
- (3) A relational pedagogy requires a reflexive awareness between teachers and students to understand the complex and nuanced ways in which relationships come to be built and nurtured. For educators, this ‘requires teachers to be more fully themselves in order to break down hierarchical relationships with young people’ (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 1041). For students, this requires moving beyond positionalities of submission and compliance to engage genuinely student-centred agency in the co-

construction of knowledge (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998b). Understanding the ways in which students and teachers come to the learning exchange as partners in this learning is crucial.

- (4) Finally, a relational pedagogy occurs at the interface of the teacher and student set *in-relation* and is premised upon ‘listening and dialogue and participatory evaluation by staff and students’, which encourages ‘openness to unpredicted outcomes’ (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 42) that being-in-relation provokes, with cognisance toward the opening of unexpected spaces for new iterations of relationality and interpersonal exchange. In doing so, a pedagogical justice can be ensured, by which the relationship between student, teacher and knowledge becomes one fashioned by curiosity, inquiry, reflection and activism.

We are cautious in suggesting that these propositions necessarily function as ends-in-themselves and draw attention to Boyd et al. (2006), who argued that putting a balance back into student learning goes beyond the development of relationality. A relational pedagogy must emphasise the *pedagogical* to remain purposeful and intentioned drawing out a sense of purpose from the day-to-day, in-the-moment encounters that teachers and students enact. This positioning provides the coherence between vital foundations for learning *as well as* school-wide reform initiatives.

The immediate, the contextual and the local

Situating the pedagogical relationship (e.g., Biesta, 2015; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Connell, 1993; Sellar, 2009) as foundational to reform initiatives identifies the precise point at which meaningful, contextualised reform agendas can be activated. It is according to the ‘dynamics’ inherent to the pedagogical relationships possible in a setting that important insights into local school reform initiatives will emerge. We cast these considerations in

terms of the tripartite conceptual framework of the *immediate*, the *contextual* and the *local* as a means for contemplating how school reform agendas might derive a conceptual focus and how this translation of the immediacy of the teacher–student relationship can provide a foundation for school-wide reform initiatives.

The Immediate

Hargreaves (1999) observed:

An effect of recent educational reforms has been to discourage teachers from engaging in the process of professional knowledge creation by which, in rapidly changing social conditions in schools and society, the profession generates new knowledge to become more effect. (p. 123)

Hargreaves (1999) also pointed to the fundamental challenge of activating school-centred reform initiatives: cognisance that alternative versions of schooling that run counter to existing formations *are* possible presents as a defining imperative of relational pedagogy. A relational pedagogy emphasises the immediacy of being in-the-moment and accordingly seeks to draw out the possibilities extant at the point of encounter between teacher and student as provocations for learning. This sense of immediacy requires teachers to maintain cognisant responsiveness to the moment and the possibilities that emerge for engaging with students and activating learning (Hickey et al., 2020). Such responsiveness, under this formulation, corresponds as a creative negotiation with the situation to identify and enact meaningful, contextualised and student-centred provocations for learning as the foundation of a curriculum. A responsive approach to pedagogical engagement and curricula formation does not require the jettisoning of existing curricula *per se*, but does necessitate a cognisant, creative and intentioned understanding of how emergent concerns, borne of the moment and provoked at the interface of student and teacher, might be meaningfully negotiated as the ‘stuff’ of learning.

Teachers need to be conscious that the immediacy of the encounter can present as unruly and messy and correspond with the deep contextualisation of the moment. Connell (2013b) explained:

Encounter implies respect and reciprocity, a degree of mutual engagement by learner and teacher. And despite the distinction between learners and teachers, that mutual engagement requires a strong kind of equality, an equal citizenship in the educational situation (104).

The array of possible lines of inquiry that *could* emerge in the situation and as the relational exchange between teacher and student identifies what ‘matters’ requires teachers who are capable of such creative responsiveness. It also requires teachers to negotiate curricula via a dialogic, problem-posing ethic, in which the role of teacher is defined more as that of *provocateur* (Hickey et al., 2020, p. 55) than as *expert*. Under the conditions of a responsive relational pedagogy, the role of the teacher is to ‘problem pose’ (Freire, 1977) and to provoke new lines of inquiry as a co-formulation of a curriculum emerges in dialogue with students.

Developing pedagogical approaches that provoke consideration of the immediate and encourage teachers to explore the possibilities that emerge from the relational encounter, offers the means for activating pedagogical reform that gives credence to the intricacy of the encounters that occurs within the school site. It also requires cognisance of the things that matter to students and how these things might be effectively woven into existing curricula (e.g., Zipin, 2017; Zipin & Brennan, 2018). Such an approach reinstates that teachers might enact to identify lines of inquiry that respond to student interests, which remain in the moment and centred on concerns that are immediate, although not necessarily inherent to the imperatives of externally imposed curricula agendas.

The Contextual

Consideration of the immediacy of the pedagogical exchange necessarily draws attention to the wider contexts within which the enterprise of schooling proceeds. Following Thrupp and Lupton (2006), we argue that context provides a vital conceptual prompt to consider how schooling must proceed in recognition of the material realities that frame how students and teachers approach schooling and the process of learning. Further, consideration of context prefigures serious recognition of the distinctiveness of individual school sites and the situated factors that define learning and teaching. Meaningful accounting of the ‘social and economic inequalities that really prevent some students from doing as well as others’ (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 312) means opening for consideration the differential perspectives that inflect the experience of schooling.

A relational pedagogy offers the possibility to understand the intricacies of the contextual specificity of the school and the differential experiences that students and teachers derive. Drawn from a deep knowledge of students’ experiences of schooling, the socio-economic circumstances of the school and wider cultural ‘conditions’ that frame how students come to and engage in learning, a relational pedagogy that accounts for context positions a realist conception of how learning proceeds. Accordingly, reform agendas that meaningfully seek to expose how context prefigures certain experiences of schooling in order to account for differing modalities of student learning signify a style of reform work that moves beyond ‘too “neutral” and politically naïve’ (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 312) agendas to actively account for the realities that confront students and teachers in the day-to-day negotiation of learning.

A school-wide reform agenda would take the contextualisation of the school as a fundamental foundation-point for enacting pedagogy. In concert with teacher cognisance of immediacy and the pedagogical possibilities that emerge in the day-to-day encounters with

students, recognition of the social, cultural and economic contexts that frame the experience of school for students and teachers provides a point of insight into how pedagogies might be activated to respond to the contextualisation of the school and teacher and student positionality.

The Local

As a primary context of student experience and the geographic setting of the school, the physical–geographical settings within which schools are located afford invaluable stocks of knowledge from which the engagement of students might proceed. Further, the local positioning of the school is where the epistemic bearings through which student and teacher knowledge of the world are formulated. To remove from view this fundamental context means to disconnect embedded knowledge and ways of knowing that emerge from the context of the local. We suggest, as a conceptual illustration, that such logics might be understood in terms of the Bourdieusian concept of habitus, which defines the ways in which society is performed through the dispositions, beliefs, capacities and actions of people (Wacquant, 2005). The local affords an epistemic base to the situation and orients how knowledge comes to be situated and enacted in practice.

In terms of school reform, any agenda that discounts local variations of knowledge and of being-in-relation risks irrelevance. Accordingly, school-wide reform agendas acknowledge that communities provide the logic of the situation from which students and teachers come to ‘know’. It is from the deeply contextualised position of the local that schooling is encountered and experienced by students and teachers.

Conclusion: Redefining the reform agenda

The modality of relational pedagogy suggested here does not rest easily with current policy mandates, which structurally discount considerations of the immediate, the contextual and the

local. To work, such an approach to school-wide pedagogical reform must activate a level of pedagogical intricacy that works ‘within and against the grain of policy simultaneously’ (Thomson et al., 2012, p. 4). This is the challenge for school-wide pedagogical reform: meaningfully engaging with students within the mandates of existing decontextualised policy agendas. However, we suggest that the cost of not accounting for the deep contextualisation of schooling, teaching and learning will result in learning that remains remote to student experience, while continuing pedagogical agendas that exclude and marginalise far too many young people.

The fundamental policy failure in Australian schooling at present corresponds with this inability to recognise and account for the deep contextualisation of learning. The propositions outlined in this paper go some way to responding to this problem, although such an undertaking will require a critical sensibility by teachers who recognise the possibilities that exist in the moment of the relational encounter with students and who can translate existing formulations of curricula to meet the demands of the moment and the generative themes these provoke.

It remains that the ‘relationships with school staff are among the most salient and influential relationships in students’ lives’ (Anderson et al., 2004, p. 96) and that students’ ‘positive development depends, to a considerable degree, on whether the contexts in which they develop, including schools, are reliable sources of supportive relationships’ (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017, p. 86). Consequently, a relational pedagogy connects to the rich backgrounds, experiences and knowledges of students to enhance the learning experience. We maintain that a primary site for observing hopeful responses to Australia’s existing reform agenda is located *within* schools. Further, it is with the work of teachers that fundamental school-based pedagogical innovation might commence. Such an approach to school-wide reform requires teachers to take up the mantle of pedagogical innovation and to claim space for the

consideration of the immediate, the contextual and the local, which will motivate innovative pedagogical reform.

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