

## EDITORIAL

# Curricular justice and contemporary education: Policy learning from Australia and the United Kingdom

## Abstract

In a time of increasing global volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, it is timely to consider the role of curricular justice in helping to prepare young people for a world of significant upheaval, difficult challenges and cascading socioeconomic, political and environmental crises. For this special issue, authors working in Australian and different UK contexts were invited to respond to the concept of curricular justice in contemporary schooling, in an attempt to engage in policy learning rather than policy borrowing across different national and international education contexts. The papers in this special issue provide diverse perspectives on curriculum making in Australia, Scotland and England, which draw on a range of methodological and empirical approaches. In doing so, the special issue provides important lessons for schools and other education contexts that seek to engage in more socially just curriculum policies and practices. In this editorial introduction to the special issue, we argue that a commitment to curricular justice across diverse educational contexts is essential to help young people face the complex challenges ahead.

## INTRODUCTION

In a blog post for the British Educational Research Association, Mills (2019) argued that the enactment of a socially just curriculum 'requires teachers who are knowledgeable about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to reject deficit constructions of young people and have deep commitments to and understandings of social justice'. Drawing on Fraser's (2010) call to dismantle systemic inequalities and reshape social arrangements to ensure full participation by all, Mills (2019) contended that a socially just curriculum would be based on a commitment to redistribution, recognition and representation. In doing so, the curriculum would provide all young people with access to disciplinary knowledge, ways of being and knowing that include the cultural and social worlds of different communities, meaningfully connecting the lives of students to the world and ensuring that the voices of young people and their communities were central to curriculum making.

This special issue arose in response to the provocations raised by Mills (2019), given the complex range of challenges facing education researchers, policymakers and educators interested in curriculum theory, policy and practice, which have further intensified over the subsequent 5 years. This special issue draws together research from diverse projects undertaken with young people, teachers, schools and communities in Australia and the United Kingdom, which were concerned with the multiple intersections between curricular justice and contemporary schooling. Each paper contributes to a broader international dialogue about the importance of reclaiming schools as places of socially just curriculum making that support rich and meaningful learning for all young people.

## ON CURRICULAR JUSTICE

Pinar (2004) contended that ‘the school curriculum communicates what we chose to remember about the past, what we believe about the present, what we hope for the future’ (p. 20). As such, any consideration of curriculum necessarily involves questions of politics and ethics, given its place in mainstream and alternative education settings from early childhood, through primary and secondary school and into university and other further education contexts. Questions regarding who gets what kind of curriculum, which and whose knowledge is included in the curriculum and who gets to make the decisions about curriculum making are important, yet often left aside in contemporary debates about education, which focus on standardised assessment and outcomes.

This special issue gives attention to the place of social justice in curriculum making policy and practice. The papers draw on different framings of justice, curriculum and knowledge, including from Fraser (1997, 2010), Connell (1993, 2012), Young (2008, 2014) and Fielding and Moss (2011). While there is diversity in the conceptual, theoretical and empirical contributions, there is also common ground in the commitment to curricular justice as a core principle for education, which is connected to the lives, hopes and aspirations of all young people, as well as being responsive to the challenges and complexities of our contemporary world.

Elsewhere, we have described our concern that not all young people receive a high-quality curriculum, which is meaningfully engaged with their lives and communities (Riddle et al., 2023). Curriculum is a social justice issue, which raises important questions about access, equity and inclusion. For our framing, we draw on the work of Connell (1993), who argued that curricular justice requires the following: (1) curriculum making to be undertaken with the interests of those least advantaged in mind; (2) full participation in common (not identical) curriculum; and (3) a clear understanding of the historical and contemporary production of in/equality. A rich, common curriculum for all young people must deliver on the promise of quality and equity, which underpins national statements of the aims of education, such as the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* (Council of Australian Governments, 2019). Further, curricular justice requires a counter-hegemonic ethics, which seeks to develop the critical and creative capacities of young people to engage with the complexities and challenges of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Riddle, 2022; Shields, 2013; Stein, 2021).

## POLICY LEARNING, NOT POLICY BORROWING

There is a long history of education *policy borrowing* between the United Kingdom, especially England, and Australia (e.g. Lingard, 2010; Mayer & Mills, 2021; Mills et al., 2021). Lingard (2010) referred to the long practice of Australian education policy regarding the United Kingdom as a *reference society*, which could be in part due to commonalities between cultural and social politics, public institutions and governance in education and other spheres. It could be argued that much of education policy borrowing involves adopting some of the worst ideas and implementing them without concern for contextual specificity nor consideration of the unintended consequences. We argue that much of the neoliberal policymaking developed over the past 40 years has involved an earnest policy borrowing on matters of marketisation, standardisation and metricisation, with little regard for the increasing social and economic (and educational) inequality that has accompanied such moves (McGregor, 2018).

Instead of policy borrowing, we agree with Mayer and Mills (2021), who suggested that it is important to engage in *policy learning*. This is what this special issue aims to do through

its bringing together of diverse perspectives from Australian and UK contexts. By sharing research experiences from contexts that share commonalities, while holding distinctive contextual differences as important, it is possible to generate meaningful comparisons and learn from each other. This special issue demonstrates how the UK and Australian education contexts, while distinct, can provide productive policy learning that speaks across different national and international education contexts.

## OVERVIEW OF SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue builds upon work undertaken by the editorial team on developing a set of principles and propositions for curricular justice in contemporary schooling (e.g. Mills et al., 2022; Riddle et al., 2023). It is timely to consider the role of curricular justice and its implications for socially just education in a context of increasing complexity and crisis facing young people in contemporary schools (Riddle, 2022). Amid widening educational, social and economic inequality, there are serious questions to be asked about the role of schooling in helping to prepare young people to address the challenges facing them, including an accelerating climate emergency, ecological collapse, food and water shortages, geopolitical conflict and rapid de-democratisation across a VUCA world (Shields, 2013; Stein, 2021). These are not easily addressed, and the role of curriculum and pedagogy is contested. However, the papers brought together in this special issue illuminate productive possibilities for reimagining schooling policy and practice through a shared commitment to curricular justice. Each paper provides a unique perspective from a range of contexts across the United Kingdom and Australia, which collectively provide a compelling case for engaging closely with questions of curriculum and social justice.

The first paper in this special issue is from Elizabeth Rushton, Nicola Walshe and Brian Johnson, in which they consider justice-oriented climate change and sustainability education (CSSE) through the lens of curricular justice. Drawing from a survey conducted with over 300 schoolteachers in England, Rushton and colleagues argue for education policy and practice to embed curricular justice and climate justice education across the curriculum. They suggest that placing knowledge at the centre of CSSE, which is framed by action for empowerment for young people, justice-oriented approaches can be more powerfully foregrounded by schools and teachers.

Taking up Fraser's tripartite framing of justice for the second paper, Annette Woods, Kevin Lowe, Greg Vass and Emma C Burns analyse how Indigenous ways of knowing and being are enacted through the Australian national curriculum. They argue that mandated curriculum content regarding Indigenous knowledge, peoples, histories and cultures is fragmented and unevenly distributed across the curriculum, which works against the stated aims of equity, excellence and inclusion for all young Australians. Woods and colleagues contend that with regard to curricular justice, recognitive and redistributive justice cannot be separated from representative justice, to which they add the need for reparative justice. They conclude with a recommendation to further consider the potential effects of reparation on curriculum and pedagogy.

In the third paper, Andrea Priestley, Stella Mouroutsou and Nuzhat Uthmani present findings from a project on inclusion and curricular justice undertaken with pre-service teachers in Scotland. Also drawing on Fraser's tripartite framing of justice, Priestley and colleagues argue for engaging pre-service teachers in debates that centre on distribution–difference dilemmas, in which systemic injustices, classroom cultures and positionalities can be critically addressed. They encourage exposure and engagement with a range of theories about social justice, knowledge and pedagogical approaches to address issues of exclusion and weak inclusion. Finally, Priestley and colleagues exhort teacher educators to link global and

local contexts, while challenging the structures of colonialism and capitalism, which continue to reproduce structural inequalities and systemic injustices.

The fourth paper sees us present a detailed case study of one school's attempt to enact curricular justice within a science teaching department in a high school situated in a high-poverty community in Queensland, Australia. We argue for a knowledge+ (knowledge plus) approach to curriculum, which combines powerful knowledge with students' and teachers' funds of knowledge to bridge the gaps between students' lives and new horizons of knowledge. In our paper, we contend that such an approach adopted by the school, which served a high-poverty community, resulted in increased student attendance, engagement and attainment, while also providing teachers with professionally rewarding experiences.

For the fifth paper in this special issue, Clare Brooks argues that the current education policy settings in England actively reproduce structural inequalities and injustice through policy levers including marketisation and curriculum control. Brooks uses content analysis and spatial theory to examine how the mandated initial teacher core content is context-free and universalises education aims and outcomes, without consideration for effects on the lives and needs of young people in schools. In contrast, Brooks suggests that a commitment to curricular justice would enable pluralistic approaches to curriculum policy and practice, which is contextualised and relevant to each school community.

Rachel Lehner-Mear, Kerry Dixon, Yuwei Xu, Catherine Gripton and Lucy Cooker take up the notion of gender as a curricular justice in early childhood for the sixth paper. Working with Connell's framing of the historical production of in/equality, they trace the flows of gender and justice across early childhood curriculum documents in England from 1996 to 2021. Lehner-Mear and colleagues found that the reproduction of power in official early childhood curriculum over time has continued to reinforced gender inequality and injustice. Instead, they argue that a reframing of early childhood with gender as a justice lens would support a more robust and responsive approach to curriculum in the early years.

In Paper seven, James Sutton, Deborah Youdell and Karl Kitching traverse challenging complexities within sexualities education in a context of converging anti-gender, anti-Muslim and de-democratising tensions in an English school. Through analysis of interviews conducted with participants holding oppositional and irreconcilable views on gender and sexualities, Sutton and colleagues argue that dissensus is a productive tool for engaging in dialogue with communities in social conflict. They suggest that schools can draw from dissensus and agonistic processes to engage with their communities and that curricular justice requires a relational engagement with difficult topics, anticipating and accepting dissensus and allowing the Other to live.

Frances Press and Jennifer Skattebol consider the importance of relationships and curricular justice in the eighth paper for this special issue. Their paper, drawing on Australian research, brings together Indigenist methodologies and Practice Architectures to examine the material, discursive and relational conditions that enable or constrain justice-oriented pedagogy. Press and Skattebol contend that a relational approach to curricular justice in early childhood education and care contexts requires deep listening, recognition, and trust. They conclude that justice is not an outcome but a process of being in relationship, which is developed in dialogic contexts.

In the ninth paper, Eve Mayes, Dani Villafañá, Sophie Chiew, Netta Maiava, Natasha Abhayawickrama and Rachel Finneran examine the ways in which schools have responded to young people's climate justice activism. The paper is co-authored with four youth climate justice activists, who worked as research associates in the project. They engage with questions of curricular justice to consider the inequitable distribution of justice-oriented approaches to teaching climate change in Australian schools, with important implications for how difficult topics might be more meaningfully engaged with by schools in ways that do not seek to minimise, decontextualise or depoliticise them.

The special issue concludes with a thoughtful response to the collection of papers by Mark Priestley, in which he considers the ethical and political imperatives of working towards

a more socially just curriculum. Priestley draws together the range of conceptual and ethical considerations raised across the papers to make a case for the urgency of ensuring that curricular justice is embedded across all educational contexts. The response considers the political nature of education, questions of whose knowledge is represented, how pedagogy is a curricular practice and the question of who should be involved in curriculum making.

## CONCLUSION

While we do not suggest that a focus on curricular justice will somehow provide a panacea to the complex set of local and global challenges over the coming years, there is a firm commitment by the contributors of this special issue, that curriculum needs to be centred in debates about schools and schooling, the work and lives of teachers and how students are best supported to become active participants in society through the worlds of work, public belonging and civic participation. In this commitment, we hold fast to Connell's (1993) argument in *Schools and Social Justice*, that 'the issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is about' (p. 15). Curricular justice involves a commitment to counter-hegemonic knowledge making practices in schools by teachers, students and wider communities.

Each paper in this special issue takes the question of ensuring socially just curriculum making practices for all young people within different contexts, including schools and early childhood education and care settings in England, Scotland and Australia. While there are contextually specific considerations, we contend that there are many similarities across the range of papers in this special issue, which speak more broadly to issues of international concern through a careful approach to policy learning. The question of how schooling might respond to the challenges and complexities of the years ahead is one that is absolutely bound up with questions of justice, of redistribution, recognition and representation, of educational access, equity and inclusion. The challenges of living in a VUCA world demand that curricular justice be a central ethical commitment by all education policymakers and educators, regardless of their particular contexts.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval was not required for this editorial introduction.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT




The authors declare they have no financial nor non-financial interests to disclose.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## KEYWORDS

curricular justice, curriculum making, policy borrowing, policy learning, schooling, social justice

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