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Whole-school relational pedagogy: establishing the climate for effective student engagement

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ABSTRACT

Relational pedagogies attend to considerations of emplacement and context by asking how education might most effectively motivate rich forms of pedagogical encounter *in light of* student and teacher positionality. However, missing from the scholarly literature are substantive accounts of the ways relational pedagogies inform school renewal initiatives. Using experiences gleaned from a school-wide renewal initiative enacted in a secondary school in Queensland, Australia, this paper explores how the convictions and practice of teachers aligned with a renewal agenda that was designed to reconceptualise teaching and learning under a 'relational' lens. This paper reports that the conditions within a school prescribe how relationality (as both concept and practice) mandate particular practice frameworks, which in turn influence the ways that students and teachers experience teaching and learning. The analysis outlined in this paper finds that relational pedagogical approaches that are not supported by commensurate school policy enactments risk becoming redundant, overlooked, or altogether proscribed when attempts towards relationality are translated into practice.

Introduction

The field of relational pedagogy has expanded significantly over recent years, with descriptions of dynamic interactions between students and teachers illustrating the constitutive characteristics of relationally rich teaching and learning (Hickey et al., 2020; Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). Relational pedagogies give attention to the ways in which students and teachers come *into* the learning encounter and how the relationships brokered in school and classroom settings shape what is possible for learning. As recent contributions to the literature illustrate (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Edwards-Groves et al., 2010; Hickey & Riddle, 2023a; Hinsdale, 2016; Ljungblad, 2019; Sellar, 2012), relational pedagogies define what it means to be *in-relation* (Lusted, 1986), and make explicit the influence and constitutive character of 'ordinary', day-to-day encounters in the configuration and experience of schooling. Teaching and learning from a relational perspective means recognising that students and teachers come into the

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pedagogical encounter as 'situated' beings, where the socio-cultural positionalities they occupy merge with the contingencies of the school's context to mediate the pedagogical encounter. Relational pedagogies attend to these considerations of emplacement and context by asking how students and teachers come *into* the teaching-learning encounter, and how education might be most effectively arranged to motivate rich forms of exchange.

Building on earlier accounts that chart the ontological dimensions of the student–teacher relation (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Sidorkin, 2000), important recent contributions including those from Ljungblad (2023) and Aspelin (2023) have examined the 'key indicators' of effective pedagogical encounters and the 'microscopic' elements that constitute relational teaching-learning exchanges. Extending illustrations of what constitutes *the* relation in relational pedagogy, Ljungblad's (2023) and Aspelin's (2023) studies, along with those of Hickey and Riddle (2023b), Kim et al. (2021) and Chika-James (2020) chart empirical accounts of the relational dynamic apparent in selected classrooms to define how relationships mediate particular enactments of pedagogic practice. The competencies required of educators and the practical considerations that come with enacting teaching and learning feature heavily in these accounts, with these conceptualisations going some way in responding to Ljungblad's (2023) observation that the field is challenged by 'the theory, mostly of a philosophical nature', and that it lacks 'empirical confirmation that is accessible for in-service and pre-service teachers to apply' (p. 786).

Although we agree with Ljungblad's (2023) concern and note that further empirical explorations of practice are vital for expanding a clear sense of the approaches and techniques required in enactments of relational pedagogies, we suggest that a further oversight is also apparent in the extant literature. At present, explorations of empirical accounts of practice tend towards particularistic 'case study' descriptions of teacher–student interaction. Emphasising the analysis and illustration of the 'microscopic' (Aspelin, 2023) elements of specific teacher–student interactions, these accounts focus on the dynamics of the interpersonal 'exchange' evident in these pedagogical examples (Hickey & Riddle, 2023a). Significantly, these accounts tend away from larger considerations of context and the systemic conditions that frame these pedagogical exchanges. Considerations of the socioeconomic positioning of the school-as-site, and the structuring of school and systemic policy overlays that order the conduct of practice in these sites receive only scant mention, with descriptions reserved primarily to recounts of the effects of the case school's general constitution and influence on classroom-level teacher–student interactions (Hickey et al., 2022).

What are missing, we suggest, are explications of the ways in which relational pedagogies are supported (or *not*) by the organisational and systemic 'structures' of the school: the larger systemic and school-wide policy mandates and practice frameworks that mediate how teaching and learning are defined and enacted in specific ways. Arguing that the 'conditions' of the school are prescribed by these policy mandates and ensuing practice frameworks, we note that examining how relational pedagogy is conceptualised and enacted *in terms of* these structures represents an important point for inquiry. We have discussed aspects of relational pedagogical activations geared towards whole-school renewal agendas in previous works, with attention given within these explications to the variations in definition and application that apply in context of the specificity of the school site (e.g. Hickey & Riddle, 2023c; Hickey et al., 2020). We turn in this paper to extend considerations of the importance of the 'structures' that order the school's form and purpose, and the implications that systemic mandates and school-wide practice frameworks have in shaping a relational approach to pedagogy.

To illustrate the influence that policy and practice frameworks exert in shaping what can be enacted under the guise of relational pedagogy, we draw on an initiative undertaken by a public secondary school situated in regional Queensland, Australia. Developed from a larger project detailing 'enactments' of relational pedagogy in Australian secondary schools (UniSQ ethics approval ETH2020–0056), we explore in the following sections how alignment between the convictions and practice of individual teachers coincided with the remit of a school-wide pedagogical renewal agenda. Noting that relational pedagogical approaches that are *not* supported by system and school policy overlays and frameworks run the risk of being overlooked, overwhelmed, or altogether proscribed (especially when they are viewed as contrary in intent to systemic requirements for 'effective' practice) we consider how this school mediated its renewal agenda within these limits.

We draw attention to the problems that the current climate of schooling presents within the Australian context, where opportunities for relational enactments of teaching and learning are overwhelmed by 'hyper-rationalised policies, over-elaborated administrative systems, and highly regimented teaching programmes' (Edwards-Groves et al., 2010, p. 46). Within tightly controlled, centrally mandated and overtly prescribed schooling contexts, teachers and students have limited capacity to generate relational encounters and modes of pedagogic inquiry that deviate from approved formulations, but which hold the opportunity for creative and contextually relevant enactments of teaching and learning.

In the following sections, we describe how the case school meaningfully supported its moves towards relational approaches to teaching and learning via the development of a 'school-wide pedagogy approach', which opened dialogue between teachers and students at the school level and larger systemic mandates associated with teaching and learning practice. Although criticism of systemic requirements and policy overlays often highlight the 'different logics of practice in policy production at the systemic level, which can be starkly juxtaposed with the logics of practice within classrooms' (Lingard, 2007, p. 262), we describe how moving away 'from decontextualised and globalised statements of supportive classroom relationships to more specific modalities of teaching and learning' (Riddle & Hickey, 2023) opened dialogues between systemic requirements and the school's contextualised position. It is with how this mediation of the school's renewed pedagogy approach itself provided a *structure* for teachers and students to enact relational pedagogical endeavours that we are interested.

Current contexts: school reform and the current neoliberal moment

Activating relational pedagogies requires more than the will and enthusiasm of individual teachers and receptive student cohorts. It also requires system- and school-level structures that i) allow for meaningful student involvement in the design and conduct of learning episodes; ii) provide time and space for teachers to deliberate on the best ways to engage with their students in the support of learning; and iii) generate capacity within schools to develop innovative curricula and pedagogical approaches

towards these ends. We go so far as to suggest that simply *intending* to enact relational pedagogy within existing systemic and school structures will likely result in failure. This is to say that relational approaches to pedagogy are in many ways anathema to existing modalities of schooling where 'market-oriented public service delivery . . . informed by "best practice", driven by incentives and targets, and closely scrutinised and monitored' (Thrupp & Lupton,

2006, p. 311) represent the prevailing way of 'doing' schooling. As an extension to the wider neoliberal reformation of the socioeconomic sphere (Giroux, 2005, 2015; Harvey, 2005), education has over recent decades come to be defined by a conjoined logic of uniformity, performativity and accountability, in which enactments of prescribed practice are authorised and monitored within and by decontextualised policy mandates that define in limited ways what 'counts' as effective teaching and learning (Ball, 2015; Hickey et al., 2022; Kamler & Comber, 2005; Sandvik, 2020). The manifestation of these 'authorised' approaches to pedagogy order the conduct of teaching and learning within narrow frames of approved practice.

Two challenges for relational pedagogy emerge from this situation. First, as pedagogical formations that emphasise teacher–student dialogue and the 'informality' (Hickey & Riddle, 2022; Hickey et al., 2020) that comes from the negotiation of the teaching-learning exchange, relational pedagogies proceed *in-the-moment* to respond to the 'immediacy' of the pedagogical encounter and the negotiations of learning that students and teachers broach (Hickey et al., 2022). However, in a prevailing context in which schooling proceeds under a regimen 'of managerial controls, decisions driven by budgetary constraints, and narrow academic standards' (Sandvik, 2020, p. 118), seeking to recentre what happens in schools towards more deliberative and relational approaches to teaching and learning represents a radical, if not *risky*, undertaking (Biesta, 2015).

Second, the effects emanating from prevailing approaches to teaching and learning are also evident in the *permissible* range of enactments that teachers and students are enabled to perform. As Edwards-Groves et al. (2010) identified:

> Life in education is becoming highly constrained, controlled and restricted by the meta-practices of educational policy and administration that commodify and regulate education at every level and to an unprecedented extent. What is being challenged . . . is the scope of action which enables educators to act and interact with freedom, agency and integrity in their professional relationships. (p. 46)

It is with the implications for what is taught and how it is learned within the prevailing conditions of uniformity and accountability that a particular challenge for relational pedagogies surfaces. Extending from the challenges noted above, and apropos the limited range of possibilities surrounding what is taught and how it is learned, a commensurate challenge pertaining to the performativities available to teachers and students (i.e. the range of available ways of 'being' an educator and a learner) prescribes what happens in schools.

By contrast, relationally rich forms of pedagogical encounter emphasise student-led negotiations of curriculum and responsive ways of teaching that encourage inquiry (Hickey & Riddle, 2022). In this vein, relational pedagogy problematises 'expected' ways of performing the role of teacher and student that define typical expressions evident in schools, and in doing so, open possibilities for new forms of interaction to occur. The challenge comes in breaking away from existing forms of *doing* and *being* and moving beyond 'ritualised' enactments of enculturated practice to redefine what it means to be a teacher and a student (McLaren, 1999).

The experiences recorded in the case school demonstrate how these challenges were encountered during this school's efforts to constitute its relationally motivated school-wide pedagogical approach. In coming to define relational pedagogy as conceptual motif and practical orientation for their practice, the school's leadership, staff and students encountered points of tension in i) framing what it meant to undertake a relational mode of education in context of prescriptive systemic requirements, and ii) reorienting existing practice *within* the

school and to which staff and students were accustomed. While we argue that pedagogical reform agendas are best situated *within* school sites and that the registers of contextualisation that mark the school setting as unique and idiosyncratic provide valuable foundation points for shaping pedagogically driven renewal agendas (Hickey et al., 2020), we note that the process of reconstituting a school's pedagogical direction is not a straightforward undertaking. We turn now to consider the ways in which the case school positioned relational pedagogy at the core of its pedagogical approaches to enact its whole-school renewal agenda.

Case study: establishing a whole-school approach to relational pedagogy

The case school operates as a state-funded secondary school with a student population of just over 700 students, serving a regional community in south-east Queensland, Australia. In 2023, the school commenced a program of renewal, with a new Principal commencing a subsequent restructure of the leadership team. It was also at this point that the revitalisation of the school's approach to pedagogy commenced. Progressed by a Professional Learning Team (PLT) led by the Deputy Principal and constituted by senior members of the school staff, including Heads of Department and Pedagogy Leaders, the PLT was tasked with defining how the school's approaches to teaching and learning could be enhanced, with emphasis given to the range of pedagogical relationships teachers and students broached across the course of their day-to-day encounters.

The first step in this agenda involved undertaking a pedagogical 'stocktake' to consider where existing demonstrations of effective practice were evident. A series of exemplar accounts of relational teaching and learning were compiled by the Deputy Principal and Heads of Discipline as descriptive narratives outlining what was currently regarded as effective pedagogical practice in each discipline. The accounts relayed to the PLT illustrated the current context of teaching and learning within the school, and illustrated where individual teachers saw strengths in their practice. For example, narratives compiled by the English Head of Department relayed instances of co-teaching and student negotiated curriculum that represented innovations in this discipline. Colleagues in Physical Education detailed approaches to merging classroom and field-based activities that recognised student fatigue and timetabling compression that affected students' capacity to engage in different activities throughout the course of the week. The Heads of Discipline as representatives of the PLT provided an important point of insight and correspondence in this relay of practices occurring within their disciplines, with the accounts they reported providing an empirical basis for gauging how students and teachers currently interacted and where 'ways of speaking, of expressing opinion, of moving about and using space' (Hickey & Riddle, 2022, p. 798) could be examined, refined and expanded to improve teacher practice and student engagement and learning.

There is not space in this paper to discuss the intricacies of these modalities of practice; but in general terms the development of this baseline account drew on these empirical designations as a starting point for renewing the school's pedagogical agenda. By commencing with exemplars of existing practice, the PLT were able to indicate that existing demonstrations of practice that positively engaged students and that generated successful student outcomes *were* evident in the school. This was important not only in affirming the confidence of a staff that had experienced significant change and upheaval in the preceding years, but also in providing a tangible sense of how the renewal agenda could proceed. Rather than impose an abstracted designation of what constituted relational pedagogy—one derived from a set of normative

values surrounding the purpose and intent of relational approaches to teaching and learning —the PLT utilised these existing demonstrations of practice to establish a meaningful baseline from which the school's pedagogical renewal would expand.

Guided by a conviction to student centredness in learning, democratic negotiations of curricula and the formation of strong bonds of affiliation between teachers and students, the existing exemplars of practice provided a basis to develop a whole-school approach to relational pedagogy that affirmed the importance of the teacher–student interrelation in negotiations of learning and teaching (Lusted, 1986). In this school, an 'effective' relational pedagogy was built upon an ethic of 'participatory interaction', which informed 'ways of being and doing [that] gave focus to the development of affinity between participants' (Hickey & Riddle, 2022, p. 799). Starting with exemplars of existing practice enabled the PLT to define formulations of relationality that were contextually appropriate to this school, and which established a tangible foundation for staff to consider in terms of their own practice.

Recording pedagogical renewal: a brief note on method

The authors—two university-based academics and two members of the case school's staff who were integral to the PLT—used the weekly workshops and planning sessions convened by the PLT to record and interrogate the development of the school's renewal initiatives. Throughout 2023 and into the first half of 2024, the lead author visited the school weekly to participate in these meetings as an embedded researcher and 'critical friend' of the school. This provided the opportunity to undertake participant observation (Cresswell & Gutterman, 2021) in the scheduled meetings of the PLT, Heads of Discipline and staff discipline teams. Observation of these sessions was supplemented with insights gathered through one-to-one interviews conducted with members of the school's executive leadership team, Heads of Discipline and teaching staff. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and used as data sources to orient the authors' understandings of aspects of the school's renewal agenda. Although a larger ethnographic account of teacher perceptions drawn from these interviews will appear in later works, this paper utilises interview data as a contextual reference for the explication of school-level policy development outlined in the subsequent sections.

Mapping the pedagogical approach against the whole-school renewal plan

Two documents were developed within the school to guide the pedagogical renewal agenda. The PLT compiled a *Pedagogical Approach* that defined how the school would enact its approaches to relational pedagogy. Under the format of an 'approach', this operational document included a description of the school's rationale for teaching and learning, and defined how specific pedagogical styles would mediate the delivery of curricula content. The *Approach* situated the formation of 'positive relationships' as fundamental to its focus for teaching and learning.

The second document, a school-wide *Positive School Culture* plan, motivated the school's cultural renewal agenda. The plan specified *respect*, *responsibility* and *relationships* as key values for reinvigorating the school's climate, with separate descriptors of what these keywords signified developed for staff and students. Figures 1 and 2 provide insight into each version of the *Positive School Culture* plan.

Figure 1. Positive school culture expectations for students.

Figure 2. Positive school culture expectations for teachers.

Noting a correlation identified in the literature between school climate and student engagement and achievement (Barksdale et al., 2021; Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020; Katsantonis, 2024; Pierce, 1994), the *Positive School Culture* plan established a foundation for supporting positive pedagogical engagement across the school. By setting the tone for 'a positive school climate, where students feel a sense of safety and belonging and where relational trust prevails' (Darling-Hammond & DePaoli, 2020, p. 7), the plan established how approaches to relational pedagogy would occur within the wider context of the school and its learning spaces. As Darling-Hammond and DePaoli (2020) argued:

> Creating a positive school climate buoyed by supportive relationships depends largely on schools providing time and opportunity for teachers to get to know their students, identify and respond to their needs, and develop greater alignment between school and home. Designing more personalized school structures can facilitate the creation of consistent, secure relationships for every child. (p. 7)

We note here that the 'subjective experience of school life' is tied to the 'encapsulating values, relationships, norms, and organisational structures' (Katsantonis, 2024, p. 3) inherent to the school site. Making explicit what is valued within the school, and importantly, how these values should be enacted in the day-to-day encounters that students and teachers broach, affects the ways in which teaching and learning proceeds. The *Positive School Culture* plan set the basis for a productive school climate, within which the *Pedagogy Approach* defined what would be done to meet the remit of teaching and learning.

Figures 3 and 4 provide insight into the guiding rationale underpinning the *Pedagogy Approach* and its points of negotiation for defining curriculum, learning and associated expectations of students. Emphasis was given within the *Approach* to defining how the values of respect, relationships and responsibility would find practical activation in service of teaching and learning, with the whole-school approach detailed in the *Positive School Culture* plan framing this purpose.

Discussion: points of opportunity within the systemic context

We are careful to frame a sense of the systemic limits within which the case school's renewal agenda proceeded. As a publicly funded school, the case school operates under the jurisdiction of the Queensland Department of Education. Accordingly, specific mandates around teaching and learning and student engagement prefigure how schools should proceed with pedagogical reform agendas. For example, as a guiding designation of policy, the *p-12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024), which 'specifies the curriculum, teaching and learning requirements for Queensland state schools to deliver equity and excellence in education for all students' (p. 3) is especially pertinent in framing what constitutes effective pedagogy and teaching and learning in Queensland schools. An important point of reference from the *p–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* notes that schools should endeavour to define:

> A whole school approach to pedagogy in response to assessment and reporting data [and] select and employ effective pedagogy, using the principles (the curriculum, the learning and

Figure 3. The guiding principles underpinning the school's pedagogy approach.

Figure 4. Points of enactment in the school's pedagogy approach.

the learner), to support students' achievement, wellbeing and engagement (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024, p. 4).

Within this designation, a whole-school approach to pedagogy is constituted by school-wide processes to 'determine, review and monitor how effectively the pedagogies employed are working to support students' achievement, wellbeing and engagement' (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024, p. 14). This includes schools defining approaches for 'developing a shared understanding and language about pedagogy [and] using assessment and reporting data [to] determine pedagogies most effective in relation to the principles of pedagogy ... to meet the diverse learning needs of students' (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024, p. 14).

On the surface, this heavily prescribed account prefigures that schools should establish their agendas within view of existing measures of accountability and performance. Taken another way, the possibility for something more bespoke and contextually contingent to the school site is declared. Although we are not suggesting that the initiatives underway in the case school represent enactments of school autonomy *per se*, this example does indicate how schools can create conditions that allow for decisions to be made at the local level. This echoes insights that Imsen et al. (2016) identified in the Nordic context, and Higham and Earley's (2013) accounts from the United Kingdom. At stake is the identification of what schools might do *within* the structural conditions imposed by state policy mandates (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017); a theme we expand in the deliberations that follow.

The important element emerging from the mandates that contextualise the case school centres on the capacity for schools to define 'pedagogical approaches, practices and teaching strategies *that are most appropriate*' (p. 14; emphasis added). Although framed within a logic of 'assessment and reporting', it remains that schools are encouraged to take on this responsibility for establishing approaches that are considered suitable to their context and to determine 'how effectively the pedagogies employed are working to support students' achievement, wellbeing and engagement' (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024, p. 14).

The approach taken by the case school is an example of such an undertaking. By defining and articulating a sense of the school's culture through the *Positive School Culture* plan, the school set the conditions for enacting a relational pedagogy that not only meets the needs of its students and teachers but also complies with the larger systemic requirements under which the school operates. While we appreciate that not all systemic jurisdictions afford such capacity for schools to shape and enact pedagogical innovation to this extent, we note that finding the space to develop approaches to teaching and learning that work for the school is crucial for the successful implementation of a relational pedagogy. The flexibility to determine how best to engage with students and enact teaching and learning established a context of meaningful purpose in the case school. This translated into a situation where teachers could assert professionalism to define how best to teach *their* students, at the same time the student experience was mediated through negotiations of curricula content and approaches to assessment and evaluation that best supported student attainment and learning.

Notes towards a whole-school relational pedagogy

Taking the experiences of the case school as our guide, we note that the following elements are vital for the establishment of effective school-wide approaches to relational pedagogy.

The codification of school-wide agendas for renewal

Establishing school-wide agreement on what constitutes effective teaching and learning is crucial for the sustainable enactment of relational pedagogy. As noted above, the will and interest of individual teachers and students is not enough to ensure effective enactments of relational pedagogy. School-wide agreement on i) what constitutes relational pedagogy within the school context; ii) how this will be recognised and gauged in defined formations of practice; and iii) how translations of relational pedagogy will lead to improved teacher–student encounters and student learning are necessary to ensure a supported approach to relationally motivated pedagogical renewal.

On this latter point, we note Boyd et al. (2006) concern that 'building relationships without improved student learning . . . does not constitute good pedagogy' (n.p). Without an attendant improvement to student learning and the experience of schooling, relationality risks becoming superficial in its purpose. While an argument might be made that suggests that *any* positive encounter between students and teachers represents something valuable (an expression of positive sociality and encounter), our interest is specifically towards the generation of meaningful pedagogical encounters that enhance prospects for learning (Hickey & Riddle, 2023c). Accordingly, a school-wide plan associated with relational pedagogical enactments must provide the provocation for the development and enactment of shared understandings of what constitutes meaningful, relationally motivated teaching and learning.

Teacher agency and negotiations of practice

It follows that how teachers are supported to enact their practice has bearing on the successful translation of the school-wide agenda into classroom enactments of teaching and learning. The development of the school-wide plan for relational pedagogy must enable teachers to enact their practice as agentic professionals and afford the capacity for multiple variations of what constitutes 'relational pedagogy' to surface and coalesce across the school site. The development of a supportive peer network of practice is important on this front. Opening opportunities for dialogue and the activation of shared practice informs a collegial 'funds of knowledge', which is useful 'for developing novel classroom practices that involve strategic connections' (Moll et al., 1992, p. 131) between individuals and that recognise the richness of practice evident *within* the school site. This resonates with Hofman and Dijkstra's (2010) observation that 'the sharing of expertise with other teachers in the same school' (p. 1031) generates a climate of collegial support and respect, in which knowledge generated from the network remains contextualised and relevant to local conditions. The important factor in this formation is in the recognition given to the multiple ways in which relationally engaging learning exchanges might be activated, with innovations in practice deriving from peer learning and organic activations of collegial professional development.

Negotiating systemic prescriptions of practice

In the Australian context from which we write—as in most jurisdictions across the developed world (e.g. Ball, 2015; De Lissovoy, 2015; Sahlberg, 2006)—prescriptions over what constitutes effective teaching, and how teachers and students should engage in the process of producing knowledge are mediated through policy frameworks that designate what 'counts' as effective practice (Apple, 2013, 2014; Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Kamler & Comber, 2005; Sahlberg, 2012). As the *p–12 Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework* (Queensland Government Department of Education, 2024) demonstrates, the capacity for schools to determine specific approaches *within* the guise of the wider mandates is vital in establishing how relational pedagogical practice might be constituted and enacted in contextually relevant ways. The space provided within this framework for the case school to determine how best to engage students afforded the opportunity to define a relational approach to teaching and learning that met with teacher expertise and recognised the context of the school and positionality of its student cohorts. While this was always contingent on students continuing to succeed in their learning, the opportunity to refine a bespoke pedagogical approach via a designated school-wide pedagogical plan was nonetheless possible.

Asking what capacity exists to enact a relational approach to teaching and learning within overarching frameworks and policy mandates represents an important undertaking. Finding ways to develop the relational pedagogical renewal agenda within systemic policy mandates is important if the agenda is to hold any institutional legitimacy. It is incumbent on school leaders, then, to find ways to enact what is required within the school in context of systemic requirements. This may not be always possible, but it remains that interpreting and negotiating systemic mandates on the terms of the contextual contingencies that mark the individual school as unique and 'idiosyncratic' (Hickey & Riddle, 2023c) is an important undertaking for pedagogical leaders.

We argue that these three elements are vital for the successful enactment of relational pedagogies. Ensuring that schools have functional school-wide pedagogical plans, that teachers are provided scope to contribute to the designation of relational pedagogical practice, and that innovations deployed within the school can successfully mediate systemic mandates represent three important measures for the sustainable enactment of relation pedagogies.

Conclusion

Connell (1993) argued that 'being a teacher is not just a matter of having a body of knowledge and a capacity to control a classroom. That could be done by a computer with a cattle-prod. . . . Being a teacher means being able to *establish human relations with the people being taught*' (p. 63). Teaching and learning are at core relational undertakings that require responsiveness from teachers to engage students' interests. What is required is a way of generating and enacting a *contextualised* pedagogy that responds to the 'contingencies' (Hickey & Riddle, 2023c) that mark the school site and that acknowledges the complex and differentiated factors that shape how students approach learning.

Relational pedagogy attends to these concerns. Yet, as the example outlined in this paper demonstrates, it is with how the relational pedagogical innovation extends from—*and responds to*—larger extrapolations of a school's climate that the implications for sustainable enactments of relational pedagogical practice rest. Any innovation enacted at the level of the school must in turn accede to wider systemic mandates and prescriptions for teaching and learning. This 'terrain' of pedagogical renewal prescribes certain requirements regarding the larger systemic context within which the school operates. This is the bargain that must be struck. Meeting systemic mandates (and thus securing authorisation to function) *while also* generating approaches to teaching and learning that are underpinned by 'listening and dialogue and participatory evaluation by staff and students' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 42) requires tact and careful negotiation. For school leaders, creating school climates that allow 'teachers to be more fully themselves' as professionals, and that recognise and respond to the lives and aspirations of their students (Morgan et al., 2015, p. 1041; see also Nabavi & Lund, 2010) opens out the possibility for engaged learning encounters.

In terms of the case school reported here, this involved the executive leadership team navigating the policy assemblage imposed by systemic mandates to define the parameters the school was required to work within, and articulating to the PLT the broad frames within which teaching and learning would be required to function. From this, the PLT undertook the task of establishing how teaching and learning *might* occur within these parameters, while working with staff to develop creative and responsive modalities of teaching that enabled teachers to teach with their students' positionalities and learning needs in view. This negotiation mediated the development of school-wide approaches that simultaneously met systemic mandates but allowed space for teachers to teach in ways that they felt best supported student learning and engagement. This in turn required a clear sense of the relations that defined the school; relations between state bureaucracies and the policy assemblage that governed the school's conduct; relations between the school's leadership and its staff; relationships between staff students; and relationships between students and learning.

If these factors can be considered and acted-upon, the prospects for generating whole-school enactments of pedagogy that are relational and that recognise student positionality and the effects of context will be enhanced. Schools that take account of the idiosyncrasy of their context and the positionality of their students, that allow teachers to deliberate on approaches that best support student learning and engagement, and that *write back* to inform systemic designations of 'effective' practice provide the conditions for meaningful teaching and learning encounters. Given the current state of education in most parts of the developed world, and the narrowing frames of reference that define what counts as good education, we argue that moving towards approaches that allow for more relational mediations of education represents a matter of urgency.

Disclosure statement

influencing the examination of the school-wide renewal agenda reported in this paper, this disclosure is made to inform the reader.

Notes on contributors

Andrew Hickey is a Professor in the School of Humanities and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. His research is focused on the socio-cultural dimensions of education and learning, and the relational dynamics that influence how individuals learn and engage in the social dimensions of schooling.

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Stewart Riddle is a Professor in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. His research examines the democratisation of schooling systems, increasing access and equity in education and how schooling can respond to critical social issues in complex contemporary times.

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