

## **Nurturing working class intellectuals**

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This of course varies from school to school and in direct relationship to their (social) class composition. Schools catering for the middle classes or influenced by a heavy presence of middle class and aspirant families, can afford some flexibility; sometimes even designing their curriculum in investigative and creative frameworks such as the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program or the Reggio Emilia approach. This streaming also works within schools, privileging the few over the many. While this is often overt in secondary education, it works more covertly in primary. In literacy, for example, levelled texts and reading programs that separate language from content and context 'dumb down' the curriculum for the majority of students; those from middle class families can leap-frog such literacy programs, as they are more enabled to appreciate the 'joy of reading' rather than experience it as drudgery. For the middle classes, reading is a cultural activity; for the working class it is promoted as functional.

That working class children should be condemned to a fragmented, mechanical and philistine education has been the general tendency since the beginnings of mass education under capitalism. Neoliberalism has modernised and intensified this situation: using privatisation to supply appropriate schools for the privileged, and using corporatisation to fine tune public education to meet new economic and ideological needs, especially the growing need to 'manage' student behaviour in a society that increasingly frustrates the development of healthy and happy children. Against all this, teachers who value equality, social justice and solidarity need to respond with an agenda of subversion, finding ways to enrich school curriculum, lessons and classroom culture.

In my teaching, I strive to develop learning experiences that encourage children to re-invent the world, always promoting "the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire 1970, p. 72). This cannot be reduced to student 'agency', a tendency among progressive educators influenced by social constructivism. The latter tends to mirror the social fragmentation and historical shallowness that neoliberalism relies on and reinforces. Student agency is actualised when it is rooted in historical awareness and not saturated by the dominant ideology and culture.

When agency becomes de-historicised learning becomes a matter of navigating the world rather than understanding or changing it. This postmodern approach typifies too much progressive pedagogy.

Deep learning is necessarily anchored in historical understanding and the meta-narratives (big ideas) through which we engage with history. The big ideas and questions of science, mathematics, economics, language and philosophy should not be the preserve of middle class children and elite schools. Every student is an intellectual in the making and should be treated with the respect this merits.

Progressive teachers should strive to connect every bit of learning to the big ideas that seek to explain what things are, how they work, how and why they change and where and how human agency gets exercised. Freire, in his classic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, refers to what he calls generative themes, characteristic of any given social epoch; these include major ideas, concepts and values that are in contestation. Such big

ideas – found in all the natural and social sciences – constitute ontological and epistemological frameworks for all learning.

At the same time, Vygotsky argued that, as children grow into the bigger picture, they grow into their agency. Instead of functional literacies, which produce the adapted pupil, critical literacies invoke the transformative learner. The student progressively begins to search for ways of understanding the world that can inform a practice of social transformation, one that is both local and globalised.

This transformative approach to curriculum and teaching and learning is in tune with the way children actually grow: learning precedes development. Children experience and come to know the world as a whole, not in discrete bits but through them. As they engage with the particular they get insights into the general. Every bit of learning children are engaged with is part of a bigger picture, of both the natural and social world. Children are constantly reaching for that bigger picture, and a meaningful curriculum aims to connect children with it. When learning is just an accumulation of little bits of unconnected knowledge, children may learn to function in the world but they will not become critical agents. In other words, every child can be an intellectual and teachers need to see themselves as intellectuals.

### Examples

- Here is a [philosophy module](#) that can be integrated through any number of literacy learning foci. Any philosophical question can be turned into a literacy or numeracy investigation, project or unit.
- Every scientific and mathematical question poses general ontological and epistemological problems, as well as raising questions of social organisation and change. Pick a topic. Maybe you want your students to explore the properties of plastic. An investigation of plastic, its properties, uses, history and place in social and economic production, provides students with a framework for developing scientific knowledge and understanding science as a human enterprise, embedded in social organisation and priorities. You can use a documentary like [The Story of Stuff](#) to get you started.
- Maybe for a math lesson you could write a play? Introduce your students to the Socratic method. Ask them to write and perform a play - in the form of a Socratic dialogue - about “What happens to numbers when you are not using them?”
- You can use a week of your numeracy and literacy plan to look at household budgets, locally and globally. Children develop research and information management skills in a framework that invites deep, authentic learning based on the lived experience of students and their families. Children are encouraged to think philosophically and morally; interrogating issues of resource distribution, inequality and social injustice. Inquiry questions can include: What is the difference between wants & needs? What are basic human needs? Is shelter &

food enough? Why do some people have much more money to spend? Do they have more needs?

- Another great activity that can frame an entire term of work is the organisation of a Social Justice Fair. This activity engages students in developing their understanding of social issues and problems in all their historical and socio-economic and cultural connectedness. Students explore social phenomena as dynamic and contradictory; developing an understanding of how society impacts on individuals and on how individual agency can make a difference. This activity provides students with a framework for developing their independent thinking and organisational skills. Students need to design research, sort and categorise information, analyse data, engage in dialogue (oral and written) and develop arguments and viewpoints. Inquiry questions can include: What is social justice and injustice? What is inequality? Does the world need inequality? What communities experience most social & economic injustice in Australia?
- Even physical education can be framed to raise important issues and promote global and philosophical thinking. I have used a lesson that I call *Three Balls* to get children thinking. The lesson introduces children to three soccer balls, a normal soccer ball (made in Pakistan by child labour), a Fair Trade Soccer ball and a One World Project (indestructible) soccer ball. Students engage in conversations about childhood and the rights of children: play, different conditions of life, inequalities and social injustices. Students get the chance to think and make decisions about how they relate to others - both their immediate peers and those fellow human beings that make up their larger communities and the globe they inhabit. Students are encouraged to consider how empathy and a global perspective are part of learning and growing.

## References

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996 ed.). London: Penguin Books Ltd.