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Reclaiming social justice in neoliberal times

Stuart Deerness

Abstract

While social justice and neoliberalism are often diametrically opposed on the political spectrum, in this paper I consider how both coexist and are performed in complex and contradictory ways by a teacher in a public high school. To do so, I draw from a one-year ethnography to focus on an individual teacher's attempt to enact a socially just pedagogy from within a context that was increasingly driven by market mentalities of accountability, individualism and meritocracy. Ergo, I address a paradox that is at the heart of critical approaches to education and teaching: How do teachers address concerns about equity and social justice from within a context of individualism and economic accountability?

Introduction

Education is awash with politics. In some respects, it has been one of the great social justice projects of modern democracy, with unprecedented growth in the number of people attending school throughout the world. As David Baker (2014) illustrates, the "education revolution" has seen formal education progress through time from being a privilege for the few to a mandatory essential for everyone. Across the globe, the idea of formal education has been embraced as both a personal and a common good. And it is this distinction, between personal gain and the collective interest, that has informed studies of educational politics across generations of scholarly study.

Presently, we are witnessing the assault on the democratic principles that undergird the provision of high quality public education for all – free access to good schools; meaningful, challenging, engaging and equitable learning opportunities; committed teaching by educated professionals; and appropriate resourcing. While different contexts, at both state and local level, may observe their own specific configurations, it is the sweeping shifts in politics and discourses that cross international borders which are eroding these principles. Neoliberal policies have inundated education, characterised by emphases on choice, accountability, marketization and privatisation (Ranciere, 2010). These policies are governed by the logics of competition, instrumentalism, and individuation that privilege those who already possess the social, cultural and economic capital that is prioritised within neoliberal discourse (Clarke, 2012).

At the same time as the neoliberal emphasis has come to dominate education, the socio-cultural factors, which have historically proven to shape educational access and outcomes, have been redacted. Sellar and Lingard (2014) have illustrated how

students have come to be seen as individualised clients whose accomplishments rely on their individual desire and aspiration. Teachers, too, have come to be treated more as employees than as autonomous professionals. As employees, they are to follow the dictates set from above rather than professionally controlling and monitoring their own performance, curriculum and expertise (Ward, 2012). And the democratic promise of schooling itself has come to be seen in terms of economic contributions and the participation of responsible consumers.

In this paper, I do not presume to work out all the tensions that inevitably arise between the realities of neoliberalism, rising inequality, or the oppositional tactics that social justice advocates offer. Yet, to be very clear, nor do I seek to. My purpose is to focus on the practices of one teacher in the interest of opening up new debates and recasting existing ones in such a way that might lead to more complex and nuanced understandings of how social justice commitments traverse institutional and political demands and expectations.

Drawing on a one-year critical ethnography at Winstone School (a pseudonym), I provide an account of one teacher's attempt to enact a socially just pedagogy from within a context that was increasingly driven by market mentalities associated with neoliberalism. While social justice and neoliberalism are often diametrically opposed on the political spectrum, I consider how both coexist and are performed in complex and contradictory ways by a teacher in a public high school in New Zealand. In doing so, I address a paradox that is at the heart of critical approaches to education and teaching. How do teachers address concerns about equity and social justice from within a context of individualism and economic accountability? The practices of the teacher in this story offer counter to neoliberal agendas, which posit inequality as little more than the natural state of affairs. Such agendas fail to consider how global conditions often exacerbate the circumstances that give rise to local manifestations of poverty and injustice.

Social Justice

Understandings of social justice – as an ideology as well as an approach to teaching – are widely variable. Despite its broad usage, the term remains somewhat unspecified in educational discourse. Den Heyer and Conrad (2011), for instance, argue that social justice is considered an empty signifier because of its multifarious interpretations. However, one commonality in much of the literature is the sense that education and teaching are civic responsibilities, bringing with them the obligation to care about the circumstances of others, and the means to work towards changing the structural and ideological forces that benefit particular groups of people at the expense of others. A social justice discourse within the school context aims at “benefitting the least advantaged” groups of students (Bringhouse, 2010, p. 41), who experience multiple and overlapping forms of social and educational disadvantage on the basis of their cultural, economic, class, corporeal, gendered and biographical differences (Liasidou, 2013).

In spite of this vision, the picture is further complicated by the political Right's appropriation of the discourse historically aligned to social justice projects. Michael Apple (2014) has clearly illustrated how the dominant tendencies in educational reform have moved us in directions that have damaging consequences in terms of rigorous

understandings of democracy and social justice. The appropriation of these terms by neoconservatives and neoliberals has resulted in educational injustices regarded as the responsibility of the individuals suffering the injustice, as opposed to the collective responsibility of society. Whilst sounding progressive, terms such as ‘equality’, ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’ have been employed discursively to sanction reforms that intensify inequalities and are part of the swift current of privatisation and marketization that are flowing through education.

Neoliberalism

The erosion of social justice principles in New Zealand education has not come about by chance. It is rather the unsurprising product of the neoliberal economic reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The reforms followed the emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in global politico-economic practices and thinking that began in the 1970s. In contemporary times, numerous critics decreed the death of neoliberalism following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (cf. Morgan, 2015). But it has become apparent that such proclamations were premature. Following the GFC, Morgan (2015) attests that neoliberalism has been in resurgence, manifested in different ways, but emerging from the crisis “even stronger than before” (Morgan, 2015, p. 286).

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that suggests the social good is best enhanced by freeing individual entrepreneurial choices and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (cf. Harvey, 2005). In essence, the social sphere has come to be seen as an extension of the economic domain. Michael Apple, for instance, has shown how neoliberals have viewed state supported institutions as “black holes into which money is poured” (Apple, 2006, p. 31), and that in response they have promoted the same basic principles of self-interest that govern the operation of markets. Deregulation, privatization, and state withdrawal from many areas of social provision have become common. Competition and self-interest are viewed as fundamental human characteristics, with individual action and initiative determining people’s fate rather than a reliance on social relationships, obligations and expectations generated by state, society or culture (Codd, 2008). What’s more, neoliberal advocates now occupy positions of considerable influence in realms of education, media, corporate boardrooms and financial institutions, as well as in key state institutions.

Within the broader literature, neoliberalism has been understood as a policy framework (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), identified as the institutional architecture of the state (Peck, 2001; Peck & Tickell, 2002), conceptualised through the lens of governmentality (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Brown, 2003; Ferguson, 2002; Larner, 2000, 2003; Lemke, 2002), and portrayed as an ideology (Cox & Schechter, 2012; Duménil & Lévy, 2004; Harvey, 2005). Each understanding has different implications for our reading of neoliberalism. However, viewing these analyses as independent of each other runs the risk of undermining the significance of the neoliberal’s capturing of the policy agenda and the resulting ideologies that manifest in contemporary school contexts. Instead, we should regard these understandings as relational. For instance, what began as a shift in policy from welfare state to market operations led to the restructuring

of nation states and the redrawing of boundaries between society, market and state. Relations among and between people were re-imagined, assembled and translated to effect governance at a distance. The construction of autonomous, responsabilized, neoliberal subjects involved the interplay of discourse and practices to shape people's conduct by encouraging individuals to evaluate and transform themselves. And all of the above relied on the capacity of the dominant group to project its own way of seeing the world, and for subordinates to accept this as common-sense.

In New Zealand, the emergence of neo-liberalism corresponded with the fourth Labour government coming into power in 1984. Rather than continuing with welfare assistance, the New Zealand Treasury and Minister of Finance introduced major economic restructuring and deregulation that challenged the idea of social assistance as a means to allow the unemployed and disadvantaged to maintain a minimal, but adequate, standard of living (Codd, 2008; Snook, 2000). The New Zealand Treasury described the welfare state as "a drag on the economy" (The Treasury, 1990, p. 95), and stated that the poor had an obligation to be "self-reliant" or risk being left behind. The state's role in helping the poor to become self-reliant was minimal (St John & Wynd, 2008), with subsequent governments continuing to promote policies based upon economic theories of individualism, privatisation, and marketization.

In practice this entailed replacing state support with market incomes, no matter how low-paid or insecure those incomes were. Only in the last few years has the minimum wage caught up with the rate of inflation. In fact, it is only the ever-dwindling income supplements from the state, such as the Accommodation Supplement, that make paid work viable for many of the low-paid. During the GFC food banks were overwhelmed as many found a welfare benefit completely inadequate for even minimal needs (St John, 2012).

In contrast, the incomes of top earners have leapt ahead. In 1984 the share of national income accruing to the top 1 percent of income earners was 5.6 percent. By 1999 this had more than doubled to 13.8 percent (Atkinson & Leigh, 2005), after which it slipped back to 10 percent in 2010 (Perry, 2012). This situation is comparable with international trends. Harvey (2005) shows that the share of national income of the top 1 percent of income earners in the US soared to reach 15 percent following the implementation of neoliberal policies. Increasing social inequality such as these redistributive effects are so chronic that they can be understood as structural to the entire neoliberal project. For instance, Dumenil and Levy (2004) have concluded that from the very beginning, neoliberalism was a project to achieve the restoration of class power following the wealth crash in the 1970s.

The result of this interplay of policy and practice, governance, and ideology, is a lived system of meanings and values through which social order is maintained. Public discussion concerning the role of the state now centres on the need for individuals to be responsible – supplanting the need for state support – and limiting the "nanny state's" control of entrepreneurial consumers. Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on how people think and act to the point that it has been subsumed into the common-sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world.

Neoliberalism and hegemony

While the evidence strongly suggests that the neoliberal turn is a technology for returning power to the economic elites, transformations of this scope do not occur by accident. For neoliberalism to take hold as the dominant mode of thought, a conceptual apparatus has to be proffered that appeals to our principles and values, to our inclinations and gut feelings, as well as to the possibilities that are organic to the social world we exist in. If this conceptual apparatus triumphs, it becomes so embedded in common-sense as to be taken for granted and unquestioned. This is neatly summed up in Williams' definition of hegemony as:

a lived system of meanings and values, not simply an ideology, a sense of reality beyond which it is, for most people, difficult to move, a lived dominance and subordination internalized. (Williams, 1977, pp. 108-115)

Thus, hegemony is diffused throughout society in a system of values, morals and attitudes. The establishment of a hegemonic neoliberal order, however, requires more than a discursive promotion of particular values. It also entails the “sedimentation of these values and interests in everyday practices and institutional arrangements” (Ley, 2000, p. 333). To maintain the tacit social consensus that hegemony implies, neoliberal restructuring of institutional arrangements and everyday practices must be seen as relatively functional and effective, at least in comparison to conceivable alternatives. As the maintenance of the status quo becomes intimately tied to the functioning of everyday life, the ruling values take on a natural, or common-sense, quality and become more difficult to challenge. This relationship of domination is rendered relatively secure through the application of intellectual and moral leadership. The ruling groups in society win the hearts and minds of the people, persuading them (without even seeming to do so) that the status quo is natural, inevitable, and beneficial for all, thus inducing them to identify with it.

This is especially true in the New Zealand experience, where neoliberal approaches to regulating and managing educational practices and policies have taken hold as the common-sense remedy to social problems. The public has been duped into believing that high stakes testing, national assessment benchmarks, performance pay for teachers, and private sector take-overs of “underperforming” schools is what is needed to shore up the education system and fix the problem of education's long tail of underachievement. At the same time, these approaches are seen as stemming the flow of finances and resources into the aforementioned public sector black holes.

Neoliberalism, education and schooling

Consummating the extensive epistemic and pedagogical reforms has required a complete rethink of the purpose of education and the relationship between education and the economy. This is evident in the annual publication of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Statement of Intent and Four Year Plan. Over the last nine years, the Ministry has repeatedly insisted that the education needs to change by advancing the wider role of education, skills and knowledge as foundations of economic development. Education's link to economic transformation, where working towards a thriving and

internationally competitive economy with a highly skilled workforce, is ardently promoted as education's *raison d'être*:

Education contributes to a more highly-skilled, adaptable, innovative and productive workforce and generates new knowledge. This leads to improved economic performance and a better standard of living for all New Zealanders. A more highly-skilled and innovative workforce impacts both directly and indirectly on economic growth. It increases labour productivity for individual workers, and supports innovation, entrepreneurship and building industry capacity to adapt to changing technologies and markets. (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4)

Education is critical to building a strong and successful New Zealand. It underpins our economy and how well we compete in the global market for jobs and innovation... In a rapidly evolving economy, New Zealanders need the ability to adapt and thrive in an increasingly global world. [Our] objective is to keep improving results for learners, employers, and the broader community to ensure that we are developing a workforce that is highly-skilled, well connected and well rewarded throughout their working lives. (Ministry of Education 2016, p. iv-v)

Education makes a huge difference to the economy by developing tomorrow's entrepreneurs and employees and by building the capability of our existing workforce – we help ensure New Zealanders have skills and knowledge for work and life (Ministry of Education 2016, p. 4)

Jill Blackmore believes that this type of change in purpose and relationship is reshaping education to become the arm of national economic policy, “defined both as the problem (in failing to provide a multi-skilled flexible workforce) and the solution (by upgrading skills and creating a source of national export earnings)” (2000, p. 134).

In the neoliberal archetype education is primarily seen as a private investment made by knowledgeable consumers looking to better their position in the marketplace, as opposed to a public right or state responsibility. The role of the state has shifted from providing for collective wellbeing to that of a manager or auditor of a commodity, inspecting whether established economic goals are being met and accountability mandates adhered to. Schools, for example, are no longer evaluated for whether students become liberally educated citizens but whether they become economically productive workers. Ward (2012) argues that market efficiencies and economic fundamentals determine the types of skills and knowledge required in this situation, while also creating the competitive pressures necessary to force schools and teachers to become more concerned with producing the best ‘product’ possible for the lowest possible cost.

In response to this changing purpose, several paradoxical positions have emerged, which critics decry as a worst-of-both-worlds scenario (e.g. Codd, 2008). In the first instance, schools have been “transfigured to act as if embedded in a competitive environment where the laws of economics reign” (Shamir, 2008, p. 1). That is, schools are

left to the competitive market forces of consumer choice, which shape their directions and outcomes. On the other hand, they are subjected to more rigorous monitoring, auditing and appraisal by the state. So, while being shaped by the forces of competition and the decline in state support, schools are continuously monitored and evaluated by newly established accountability institutions and mechanisms put in place by the government. Neoliberals justify this in the name of efficiency and accountability to the public, who are now increasingly recast as stakeholders or, more commonly, as *the taxpayer* (Ward, 2012).

The effort to impose benchmarks, measures and technologies of accountability has been devastating for teachers and students. McNeil (2000) for instance, has shown that standardization reduces the quality of what is taught in schools, creating inequities and “widening the gap between the quality of education for poor and minority youth and that of more privileged students” (McNeil, 2000, p. 3). What’s more, under these reforms teaching practices have shifted away from intellectual activity towards dispensing packaged fragments of information. Similarly, the role of the student as a thinker, a contributor to classroom discourse, and as a person who brings their personal stories and life experiences into the classroom, is silenced by the need to cover generic curricula at a pace established by external factors such as the crowded curriculum, high stakes assessment, and government auditing procedures. The result is that teachers are increasingly directed to focus on raising test scores and producing individuals who are economically productive rather than teaching for understanding. Blackmore summarizes that,

educational policy has shifted emphasis from input and process to outcomes, from the liberal to the vocational, from education’s intrinsic to its instrumental value, and from qualitative to quantitative measures of success. (Blackmore, 2000, p. 34)

Under the hegemony of neoliberalism, education is no longer valued for its role in casting political, ethical and aesthetic citizens. Instead, the goal has become promoting knowledge and vocational pathways that contribute to economic productivity and producing students who are compliant and productive.

The coupling of education with the demands of the market has also led some schools to want to enhance their relative position in local systems of competition. Neighbouring schools are increasingly competing with each other to attract students with beneficial qualities. This represents a crucial shift in emphasis, which Michael Apple describes as a shift from “what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (Apple, 2004, p. 20). Notions of individualism are reinforced, which locate responsibility for educational success and failure in the person of the individual, and so undercutting the idea of education as a collective and public good. Yet this is unsurprising in a national school culture strongly oriented towards individual outcomes associated with meritocracy and the rank ordering of performance. In Bourdieuan terms, the result is that a cultural arbitrary prevails, where adherence to orthodox traditions is an unconscious expression of the interests of the ruling group. It is for this reason that Bourdieu (1998) reminds us of an alternative to the logic of neoliberalism and that we

must re-establish an alternative world and an educational system that is concerned with more than economic efficiency.

Understanding neoliberalism through the lens of hegemony opens up useful avenues for the investigation of the constraints on pedagogic practices. In the second half of this article, I focus on the efforts of one teacher who is fruitfully engaged in understanding how contemporary education priorities differently enable and constrain their embodied self, as well as the education experiences of her students. This is a teacher whose experiences call attention to interesting concerns about how social justice discourse and the desire to respond to conditions of impoverishment rub up against the lived experiences of students and teachers; concerns that are especially evident when considering the characteristics of the context in which she works.

Winstone

The Winstone of today was first populated at the end of the Second World War when thousands of state houses rose from its damp valleys, like the carpets of mushrooms and strawberries they replaced. Young couples began their new lives by erecting fences and garages and then banding together to build churches – a strong focus of this new community. Descendants of the original settlers are still around, but lately Winstone has become known for its immigrant population. With its proximity to one of New Zealand's refugee resettlement centres and its clustering of state houses, Winstone has become home to the largest refugee community in the country. The number of migrants is also rapidly increasing, particularly among Asian and Indian communities. Rather than finding themselves in Winstone by circumstance, they seek out the community, particularly due to its reputation for quality schools.

The new demographics are especially evident on the sports fields, with strong Nigerian footballers taking on their Somali and Ethiopian neighbours, while young Pasifika players occupy the rugby fields. At the same venue, the annual International Cultural Festival hosts upwards of 50,000 people over the course of the day. And a midweek fleamarket also provides an opportunity to socialise and sell crafts and food dishes from migrants' homelands. Yet the dreams and aspirations of adult migrants and refugees are often slow to realise in Winstone. Language barriers, low incomes, and the absence of family support are coupled with occasional xenophobic and racist attacks. But unemployment remains the biggest hurdle. When a new supermarket opened in Winstone in 2010 it created 150 new jobs, yet there was a queue of 2,700 people stretching through the car park waiting to apply.

In this intersection of free markets, flea markets and supermarkets we can see that Winstone consists of a diversity of social and economic conditions, and these are reflected in the clash of competing educational discourses. Rather than simply demonizing one standpoint in favour of another, in the following section I reveal how working within a neoliberal context shapes teachers' embodiment of their commitments to social justice. The teacher at the centre of this study performed an elaborate dance with ideology as her personal commitments rubbed up against institutional and political demands and expectations.

Winstone School

Winstone School is a co-educational high school serving students in years 9–13 (13–18 years old), with a roll of 2200. The school has a culturally diverse student population, with over 50 percent Asian, (mostly Indian and Chinese) and almost a quarter of Pacific students. But statistics and publications point to two very different sides to the school. The published image depicts students ‘punching above their weight’ in succeeding on a national level against wealthier peers. Yet behind the scenes, lower streamed classes are over represented with Maori and Pasifika students. The same is true for their peers who live in the lower socioeconomic neighbourhoods that extend back from behind the school’s sport fields. What’s more, bullying among students has been investigated in the national media, with *Campbell Live*, a national current affairs show, depicting a simmering (female) underclass fighting with their more well to do peers. Both sides of this picture are real, but only one is openly displayed.

I spent one year at Winstone gathering data regarding teachers’ understandings of social justice and specific examples of how they embodied their pedagogical commitments. In order to establish the types of relationships that lend themselves to the closeness of ethnographic fieldwork, and as a means of understanding the school context, I volunteered to work as a teacher-aide in the school for one school term of 12 weeks. During this time, I used purposive sampling to select six participants for my study, based on their expressed understandings of the social and political context in which they worked. Understandings of social justice – as an ideology as well as an approach to teaching – are widely variable. However, one commonality in much of the literature is the sense that education and teaching is a civic responsibility, bringing with it the obligation to care about the circumstances of others, and the means to work towards changing the structural and ideological forces that benefit particular groups of people at the expense of others. Imbued in this sense of education were the participants’ commitments to analyse the roots of injustice and act on behalf of the greater public good. I wanted to find out how they thought about their work, what strategies they used to negotiate competing priorities, and what enablers and constraints they experienced in the process.

One teacher whom I worked with was Rebecca (a pseudonym). I was drawn to working with her after discussing her work on graffiti art as a way of engaging students in conversations about subjugated knowledges; about what counts as knowledge and artistic expression and who decides what is valid.

There is a strong tradition in the visual arts of providing space for disruptive practices, such as challenging what is known, questioning cultural codes, and enacting alternative social practices. bell hooks asserted that art should be “a place where boundaries can be transgressed, where visionary insights can be revealed within the context of the everyday, the familiar, the mundane” (1995, p. 138). The disciplinary tradition that Rebecca operated in, then, is embedded with the potential to provide a space for students to take up the possibilities that hooks proposes. However, as Elsdon-Clifton (2012) reminds us, the art classroom still exists within a school setting, which is defined by specific social and cultural structures.

Within the art department at Winstone, there was a sense of a cultural collision.

While from a broader perspective, art education has an exciting and radical pedigree, the orthodox teaching of art at Winstone was harnessed to explicitly instrumentalist curricula and pedagogical agendas. Rebecca's views on education and the aesthetics of her teaching practices created some dissonance when confronted with the orthodox school culture. As a result, she had to be creative about how she created space for her own practices.

Drawing on James Scott's (1990) concepts of public and hidden transcripts, Rebecca performed to the public transcript of neoliberal school culture in the face of the authority of the orthodox. Rebecca's public transcript was visible in her role in school appraisal system committee. This committee was charged with developing and implementing a metric of accountability for appraising teachers and evaluating factors that were seen as crucial to the performance of their role and the success of the school. More widely, Benade's (2012) critique of the Education Workforce Advisory Group's *Vision for the Teaching Profession* has analysed the specific neoliberal policy directive that has given rise to the priority of teacher appraisal and accountability. On the surface, the need to improve teacher support and enhance their development is a positive concern. But neoliberal reformers have detached the issue of improving teacher quality from the conditions that produce it (Benade, 2012; Connell, 2011). Instead, the reformers are pouring vast amounts of money into accountability systems and "an imposing new apparatus of testing, accreditation, and surveillance" (Connell, 2011, p. 74). These accountability standards are designed to replace collaborative professional culture and experienced instructional leadership with what Karp referred to as "a kind of psychometric astrology" (2012, p. 278), which lacks credibility and a basic understanding of the human motivations and relationships that make good schooling possible (Connell, 2011; Karp, 2012).

Although Rebecca played a key role in establishing the mandatory appraisal process, she was also able to manipulate it to gain traction with the changes she envisioned. The appraisal process included observations of her teaching by her Head of Department, who Rebecca described as, "a bit of an old dinosaur really. He just does his same old thing, but he's really a bit of a handbrake to some of the developments we'd really like to make" (Rebecca). While Rebecca was required to demonstrate particular competencies and expected practices, she spoke of how she exploited the situation to try to influence her Head of Department's future teaching:

This class is completely socially diverse. But there are things that you can do to facilitate harmony. Cliff did an observation of me the other day [...] which was interesting because we decided to do it on my movement around the students and my interactions with them. It was a goal that I came up with because we know that that's an area that Cliff would benefit from seeing. (Rebecca)

Hidden transcripts, according to Scott (1990), are specific to a given situation and community and are ordinarily staged outside the scrutiny of the public domain. Behind the backs of those considered more powerful, hidden transcripts transpire as individuals respond, resist, and re-act to the oppressive scenarios within which they find themselves.

Rebecca's hidden practices were unique to her own situation and included a whole range of patterned yet spontaneous gestures, activities and speech acts. Perhaps her most influential hidden practice was the decision to redevelop the Year 10 art programme, a programme that only Rebecca and her ally Sylvia were responsible for teaching. In this way, they were able to implement an unorthodox programme away from the scrutiny of more traditional teachers in their department.

Cliff [Rebecca's Head of Department] hadn't been interested in the past. We just kept on doing the same old thing, and our numbers were really dropping. But when we knew he wasn't going to be teaching the Year 10 programme we decided to do it anyway... We reduced our Year 10 classes to half a year so that we could get more traffic. We doubled the number of students that have taken our subject in year 10. [Then, we] basically had a negotiation with our classes, and we talked about what they wanted to do, what they wanted to get out of being here, and then – together – we matched that up with what we wanted to try [...] I think the atmosphere in the class is really good. I think that's a really good reflection that there are kids in the class who just feel good about doing the work, what they're interested in. (Rebecca)

When we spoke about the constraints that impact on her teaching, Rebecca mentioned many of the tangible neoliberal mechanisms such as reduced staffing, large class sizes, lack of space, resources and funding,

Physically our space couldn't handle it. We don't have space for them. We don't have the staffing for it and we want to have more students in our department. If we were supported to increase that positive growth, we should be given three classes of 20, not two classes of 30. (Rebecca)

But she was also aware of a more subtle, ingrained mindset that shaped what she was able and unable to do:

The perceptions, parental perceptions of what students should be doing at school and what is valuable. I asked a year 10 kid, Malcolm, whether he was taking this subject next year and he just said 'my mum and dad are choosing the options'. So he has absolutely no say. When we had our meeting with the curriculum committee that was one of the things that we brought up, in terms of challenges. That challenge of perceptions and students who were really abled, would love to take it, but won't take it because mum and dad are deciding. (Rebecca)

In contrast, Rebecca understood that for many of her students, electing to take her classes was not about getting a grade, or about providing a pathway to employment, but rather about having a place to express their selves. Rebecca emphasised youth culture and practiced a pedagogy that opposed the view that students possessed no agency to think for themselves or as creators of culture; she believed that young people have voices that should be heard and actions that should be studied. Her students often

suggested the visual contexts and mediums that Rebecca used to teach the techniques and approaches under study,

A couple of years ago, [Sylvia] and I recognised that our aesthetic was completely out of touch with the students... we were still thinking in a very traditional sense and then we noticed that some of the work they were producing, to us, to our aesthetic, was really jarring... When we started to look and see the stuff they were exposed to, and seeing what was actually happening in contemporary practice, we went 'oh my goodness', you know, what's happening is where they're at. We went 'okay, our aesthetics are completely out of touch, we need to get with the programme'. (Rebecca)

In Sylvia, Rebecca had an ally in her department, whom she worked with to surreptitiously implement a critical dimension to the art programmes. But not all of her work-friends shared her stance. At the beginning of one staff meeting, I was sitting with Rebecca and several of her friends from an array of departments, waiting for the meeting to commence. As we looked over the agenda, Rebecca spoke quietly with a geography teacher sitting next to her about the appraisal observation I have referred to above. I took this teacher to be a trusted confidant, but interestingly she was unsure about Rebecca's actions, and expressed caution about "not rocking the boat" (Field notes, October).

In the public forums provided by meetings and committee work, Rebecca took a line of agreement with most of the discussion points, yet offstage she was able to critique and reclaim her own socially just pedagogical commitments. Rebecca's classroom was a space where she was free to enact pedagogies that challenged widely held assumptions. The following example illustrates how Rebecca embedded critical issues into these lessons.

We had been spending some time developing our own concepts of a super hero one lesson, when I overheard a conversation that Rebecca was having with several students about the conventions of comic book characters. She had been walking among the students, observing their work and providing advice, when she engaged a small group of girls and boys in a conversation about the female body. "I've always thought that if I was a super hero and had boobs that big that they'd just get in the way."

The students giggled at her comments, but were then asked to think about the conventions of drawing super-heroes, and the messages that they send, before thinking about cultural conventions in everyday society. This small group of students were thoroughly engaged and continued their conversation as the teacher wandered off to the next group. When I later asked her about this instance, she said:

I feel there's a luxury, where I can teach a, ahh, a hidden curriculum. I do purposefully think about that other layer and I try to take opportunities to discuss different issues. Sometimes it will be, like my analogies; I love coming out with different analogies and stuff, and they become a little opportunity to inject a critical stance. (Rebecca)

But despite her efforts to challenge orthodox practices, Rebecca wasn't immune to the powers of neoliberal agendas. Her everyday practices were increasingly inundated with statistics, measures, benchmarks, and points of reference. The increased complexity of this discourse disrupted the stability of her job by making intentions increasingly confusing and contradictory "I'm sometimes not sure what parts of our work is valued most, which makes it hard to prioritise things. Am I doing this because it's important, or because I'm being checked against it?" (Rebecca). In discussing how teachers respond to the increasing performativity under neoliberal governance, Stephen Ball explains how much of this reflexivity is internalised. These questions become "matters of self-doubt and personal anxiety rather than public debate... Constant doubts about which judgments may be in play at any point mean that any and all comparisons and requirements to perform have to be attended to. Selection and prioritisation becomes impossible and as a result the pressures intensify" (Ball, 2003, p. 220).

At different times of the academic year Rebecca unconsciously reverted to conventional teaching methods as she felt the pressure to meet expectations. As assessment deadlines approached, particularly in senior art classes, her efforts to help students became more directed to preparing them to meet particular standards and norms. Students were often left wondering why they had to add or subtract particular features in their work and at times felt that their desire to express themselves was compromised. On one such day I had been talking to a group of Year 11¹ students as they applied finishing touches to their first experience of externally assessed material. Rebecca was flitting between students, giving them instructions before disappearing to the storeroom where she was collating work to be sent to Wellington for examination. Several students expressed their dismay at not understanding why a particular piece required another dimension, or why a composition had to be rearranged on their folio board. When they tried to raise these questions, Rebecca appeared frazzled and apathetic to their queries. It is clear in this instance that there were conflicting agendas at work. The opportunity for teacher/student engagement was diminished and the students felt they had lost the space to express themselves. Likewise, Rebecca was cramped by the administrative demands and unable to manoeuvre between these demands and her creative expression of pedagogy, as she resorted to a logic of practice that quashed any expression outside the norm and required teaching to be delivered within a narrow set of actions.

This was also evident in her decision to focus on redeveloping the junior programme; a programme that was relatively free from the pressure and scrutiny that comes with the high stakes assessment of the senior programmes.

What is significant about both the formal and informal acts of knowledge production associated with Rebecca's pedagogy is that they were facilitated not only by Rebecca's actions as a teacher but also by the particular kind of social space that her pedagogy and curricula approach served to create. In this case, Rebecca's emphasis on democratic knowledge production is characterised not only by its situatedness in the everyday lives of her students and their questioning of "expert" knowledge, but also by its emphasis on both the material and aesthetic aspects of social life. Rebecca's embodied pedagogy served to interrupt the traditional hierarchies associated with knowledge production and consumption, as well as the neoliberal discourses that appropriate local participation for the purpose of economic ends.

Conclusion

The challenge to substantially contribute to reducing the conditions that lead to education being taken as a proxy for national economic policy has been laid down by peers within the education community. The challenge is of course enormous. Despite the crippling consequences of neoliberal policies for an escalating number of people and communities worldwide, discourses that celebrate market liberation and individual freedom have become so ingrained in everyday life that we have collectively yielded to what Freire (1970) would call a limit situation – unable to see beyond social structure, unable to imagine another reality. In fact, over the past decades, neoliberal policies have become so dominant that they seem necessary, inevitable, and unquestionable. As Bourdieu argues,

Everywhere we hear it said, all day long – and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength – that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neoliberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 29)

The atomistic responses of the participants in the wider study were eclectic and wide-ranging in their purpose and effect. The individual acts that I have highlighted here are only a small piece, and this is only one teacher among many, from one school among hundreds. My intention is not to romanticise their actions. As Mortimore and Whitty (2000) warn, there are perils in generalising the practices of remarkable individuals.

Though less explicitly confrontational than an open revolt, Rebecca's *everyday acts* still functioned as resistance in that they mitigated the claims made by the appropriating class (Scott, 1990). The contrast between *everyday* resistance and more conventional (and more obviously contentious) forms of political mobilization illustrates the ways in which acts of resistance vary in their visibility. Rebecca manipulated her behaviour in order to call into critique the oppressive nature of the neoliberal agenda, while avoiding recognition of her resistant behaviour. In this case, her hidden practices represent a certain agency that enabled her to interrogate issues of power in her school, to make independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions and to exercise judgement in the interests of others. In simultaneously embodying conflicting approaches, Rebecca can be seen alternatively as a socialized being as well as an agent of change whose choices and actions variably reflect the implementation, alteration and subversion of the curriculum context in which she works.

In responding to Bourdieu's (1998) challenge to re-imagine an alternative to the logic of neoliberalism and to create an education system that doesn't succumb to the pressures of economic efficiency, Rebecca's practices give us credence to understand teachers as more than passive victims of the power elites who control and *create* the popular mindset. She was not so thoroughly immersed in hegemony that she could not perceive its pervasive presence. Instead, she was capable of (at least hidden) challenges to the arbitrariness of orthodox culture.

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Endnotes

- 1 Year 11 is (generally) the first year that New Zealand high school students sit national high stakes assessments under the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

How does Singapore govern the private education institutions?

Sam Choon Yin

Abstract

This paper reviews the regulatory framework that the Singapore government has put in place since 2009 to improve the standard of governance of private education institutions (PEIs) in Singapore. It recommends a shift in focus, from procedure to product, to give greater assurance to students that the qualifications attained with the PEIs are valued by the hiring companies.

Keywords: governance, private education, Singapore

Introduction

In June 2009, it was reported that Brookes Business School, a private education provider in Singapore, had issued fake degrees from the RMIT University although the school had no association with the Australian University (*The Straits Times*, 2009a). The school was shut down by the Singapore Ministry of Education in July 2009. This, and other cases referred to below, indicated that the private education sector in Singapore could not be left entirely on its own. The case for more extensive regulation was too strong to be ignored. On 1 December 2009, the Singapore Parliament passed the Private Education Act which provided for the establishment of the Council for Private Education (CPE hereafter) – a statutory board under the Minister of Education. The rationale for its formation was described in the inaugural issue of the Council's Annual Report:

In recent years, the private education sector has grown rapidly, driven by the rising demand for lifelong learning and upgrading of knowledge and skills... The rapid expansion of the private education sector in Singapore has led to uneven quality of provision across the sector, resulting in the need for higher standards and stricter rules to be established. (Council for Private Education, 2012, p. 18)

With the enactment of the Private Education Act, private education institutions (PEIs) are required to comply with the prescribed standards and procedures stipulated in the Enhanced Registration Framework (ERF). Failure to meet the requirements and legislative obligations would result in the closure of the school or inability of new applicants to secure a licence to operate. By the end of 2010, 210 PEIs met the basic requirements of the ERF. A year later, 338 PEIs were registered under the ERF. The number of PEIs fell marginally to 319 as at 31 December 2013 and 312 as at 31 December 2014. This is a significant reduction in the number of private schools in Singapore, from 1,200 institutions in 2007.

While there have been numerous articles and books written about the education sector and education system in Singapore, they focus almost exclusively on matters pertaining to public education. Scholars have captured only a sliver of the private education sector (Daquila, 2013; Waring, 2014).

In S. Gopinathan's recent book on Singapore's education, which reviewed the sector's ups and downs as Singapore celebrated its 50th year of independence, there was no mention of the private education sector at all (Gopinathan, 2015). This is a surprising omission in the education literature in Singapore, particularly as the private education sector represents a large segment of Singapore's higher education sector. As at the end of 2014, there were a total of 151,704 students enrolled in the PEIs of which 48% were Singapore citizens and permanent residents. The sector employs a total of 16,000 teachers and 7,500 non-teaching persons. There are various types of PEIs. Commercial PEIs such as the PSB Academy, Kaplan Singapore and Singapore Institute of Management Global Education (SIMGE) represent the bulk of the total number of PEIs in Singapore, offering post-secondary certificates, diploma and degree programmes. More than 60% of the students in the private education sector are enrolled in commercial PEI courses. Vocational PEIs such as Tourism Management Institute of Singapore, the training arm of National Association of Travel Agents Singapore (NATAS) offer courses in specialised or niche areas such as Beauty and Spa, Culinary and Hospitality, Nursing, Healthcare and Social Sciences, Electronics and Mechanics, Art and Design and Performance Arts. They account for 7% of the total student population as at the end of 2013. About 8% of the student population is enrolled in courses offered by preparatory PEIs, which prepare students for professional qualifications, particular accountancy, as well as primary and secondary level examinations (e.g., GCE 'O' and 'A' levels). Foreign System Schools such as the Australian International School and Canadian International School offer primary and secondary education that is in accordance with international curricula, primarily to children of expatriates residing in Singapore.

This paper attempts to fill the gap in the literature. It has a modest objective. The paper begins by analysing the regulatory framework that the Singapore government has put in place since 2009 to improve the standard of PEI governance. The current framework requires the PEIs to develop procedures and processes, and provide paper work evidence to demonstrate compliance. The paper argues that a procedure-focused approach, while serving its objectives to impose some accountability mechanisms, is necessary, but is not sufficient. It recommends that the CPE pay more attention to the quality of the academic programmes and the learning outcomes attained by the students. This would require greater scrutiny of the curriculum, delivery methods, modes of assessments and teaching hours to ensure that students are not deprived of quality education. Greater emphasis on academic excellence would result in further restructuring of the private education market, including the possibility of reducing the number of PEIs in the industry. Ultimately, this would legitimise the PEIs and give greater assurance to students that the qualifications they attain are of good quality and recognised by hiring companies.

Private Education: A Brief Overview

Worldwide, private education institutions took in about a third of the total student enrolment, and accounted for a greater percentage of total higher education institutions (Levy, 2006). Citing data from Pathenon-EY, *The Economist* reported that the number of students enrolled in private higher education has grown at a faster rate than those in the public sector in Turkey, France, Germany and Spain (*The Economist*, 2016). Fiscal constraints have imposed a challenge to the government to finance increasing number of students in their pursuit for higher education, permitting the surge of the private education providers to fill the gap and absorb the demand for higher education (Longden and Belanger, 2013; Enders, De Boer, & Weyer, 2013).

However, the profit motive of the education providers has been associated with issues of low quality academic standards (Harman, 2003; Marks, 2007; Ward, 2007). PEIs have been accused of allowing students to ignore strict academic standards in terms of assessment and attendance (Bryman, 2007; Lechuga, 2008). Private education providers have also been accused of recruiting academic staff with marginal qualifications as a means to save costs and of pegging the curricula to the minimal standards (Bernasconi, 2013). Opponents to private school education have pointed to the lack of academic integrity, for example, by maximizing class size thereby creating a non-conducive environment for learning (see Bernasconi, 2013; Kinser, 2013). This concern has been exacerbated by the lack of transparency in both academic and non-academic aspects (Pitcher, 2013; Lok, Gazi Mahabubul Alam, and Abdul Rahman Idris, 2016). Others, like De Boer and Goedegebuure (2009) and Montez, Wolverton, and Gmelch (2002), have raised concerns about the role of Academic Deans of for-profit education providers. They are selected by management with the approval of the business owners, and they are often held responsible for meeting the financial targets of the education institutions. Lechuga (2008, p. 304) has warned:

Generating profit through education may seem like a novel concept to many in academe, but one cannot deny that revenue generation is of increasing import [sic] to private nonprofit and public colleges and universities. Traditional institutions, however, structure revenue generation activities in a way that maintains faculty autonomy. For-profit colleges and universities function differently. In essence, they have created an education paradigm that readily views revenue generation as the main objective of the institution and have intentionally structured faculty work to meet this objective.

There have been reported cases of improper practices among the PEIs. In the United States, the Federal government won a major court case against a private school, Corinthian College Inc (see “Corinthian Colleges Ordered to Pay Damages to Students”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 2015; “Will Corinthian Colleges be able to pay back students?”, *The Atlantic*, 30 October 2015). The latter was alleged to have advertised false placement rates by hiring its own graduates as a means of recruiting students and swindled students to take out private loans at higher interest rates. The now defunct, private, for-profit school, which oversaw 100 schools in states such as California, Oregon

and Arizona, was asked to pay back US\$531 million in damages to students in October 2015. The US Department of Education had earlier fined the college US\$30 million for overstating the job placement rates (see “How a \$30 million fine against a for-profit college could be a win for students”, *The Washington Post*, 15 April 2015).

In the United Kingdom, the West London Vocational Training Centre, a for-profit college in Wales, was suspended in November 2015. It was alleged that the college had accepted fake certificates from students and used them to apply for Welsh government-funded students’ finance loans and grants. Students were effectively told that they could receive cash without having to attend classes regularly. The Welsh government suspended payments to the college and its students. The misconduct was exposed by a reporter posing as a potential student (BBC, 2015). These cases show that some PEIs are willing to engage in unethical or illegal conduct in order to increase student enrolment, a possibility which supports government regulation of the sector.

Private Education Sector in Singapore

This section briefly describes the private education sector in Singapore and the regulatory framework that was put in place to raise the standards of governance among the PEIs. In the early years of independence, the Singapore workforce suffered from low levels of, or no, education. A committee formed in 1976 to review Singapore’s technical education noted that only 16% of secondary school leavers furthered their studies at post-secondary education institutions, including the polytechnics. The drop-out rate at Primary level 6 was at 40% (Varaprasad, 2016, pp. 30–31). The ‘Goh Keng Swee Report’ published in 1979 found that 65% of the Primary 1 cohort did not manage to obtain at least three ‘O’ level subjects in secondary school education, and only 19% of primary school cohorts passed both English and the mother tongue language at ‘O’ level (Goh and Education Study Team, 1979). In 1980, as Varaprasad (2016, p. 124) reported, 70% of the working adults had, at most, primary-level education qualifications whereas 17% of the professional and technical workers had primary or no qualifications. There was, therefore, a huge pool of working adults who had missed out on the opportunity to acquire a paper qualification early in their lives. There was also a high demand for degree courses from polytechnic and vocational education graduates, which took in 45% and 25% of the post-secondary school cohorts, respectively.

The individuals’ aspirations to obtain a higher education qualification greatly expanded the private education sector in the 1980s and early 1990s. In the early 2000s, growth in the private education sector coincided with the Singapore government initiative to position Singapore as a ‘Global Schoolhouse’. This followed the recommendation from the Education Workgroup of the Economic Review Committee. A specific recommendation that was targeted at the subsector of the education industry was to develop private commercial and speciality schools. As Arnoud De Meyer, the Chair of the Education Workgroup of the Economic Review Committee, commented: “Singapore has strong publicly funded institutions and an emerging pool of private sector providers. Helping private providers to grow, facilitating partnerships between institutions and attracting new players into the market would create a Global Schoolhouse” (Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI), 2002, p. 1). The proposed strategy was “to build a nexus

of 40 high-quality schools, each enrolling at least 1,000 international students, so that the schools are of a substantial size and have the experience, credibility and strength to compete overseas” (MTI, 2002, p. 3).

The report by the MTI Education Workgroup identified the lack of a centralised agency along the lines of the British Council, the US Education Information Centre and IDP Education Australia to promote Singapore as a learning destination. The committee recommended the setting up of a central agency to spearhead efforts to promote Singapore, leveraging on Singapore’s strengths such as a strong academic reputation, a safe and progressive East-meets-West society and the use of English as the language of instruction to attract full-fee-paying international students.

The rapid expansion of the private education sector in Singapore in the 1990s and 2000s has led to uneven quality of provision across the sector. On 3 July 2004, it was alleged that the former Chief Executive Officer of Nanyang Institute of Management, Lin Shuang Liang (also known as Alan Lin) had abetted his clerk, Betty Lau Pei Ti, in falsifying the visa applications of 11 foreign students to speed their approval by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) (*The Straits Times*, 2004). On 26 February 2008, two other private schools in Singapore, Camford Business School and Boston International, were reported to have employed dubious practices by offering degrees from unaccredited universities. Camford Business School offered degrees from Paramount University of Technology, a well-known degree mill institution based in Wyoming in the United States whereas Boston International was alleged to have worked with a West Coast University which has received accreditation by an agency in the South Pacific islands of Wallis and Futuna (*The Straits Times*, 2008).

The checks and balances that were put in place then were inadequate to protect the interests of students and the reputation of Singapore’s education industry. One of the measures was the CaseTrust Education scheme, which was launched in September 2004 by the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE), in collaboration with the Economic Development Board (EDB), SPRING Singapore, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and the Infocomm Development of Singapore (IDA)¹. CASE has relied on what Tan and The (2013, p. 281) refer to as the ‘honour system’ of assessment whereby compliance by the private schools is assumed instead of adopting a more thorough system that involves regular audits and checks to ensure actual compliance. Apparently, Brookes Business School did not notify CASE about the ‘RMIT’ course and, as a result, CASE was not aware of the case involving Brookes Business School until *The Straits Times* broke the story in early 2009. Brookes Business School was expelled from the CaseTrust scheme in July 2009, possibly the heaviest penalty CASE could impose on private education providers as it had limited legal power to prosecute offenders.

Notably, the academic excellence component was left out by CaseTrust. As Seah Seng Choon, the Executive Director of the Consumers Association of Singapore (CASE) declared (in the wake of comments from the general public after news of Brookes Business School peddling fake degrees broke out in June 2009; see *The Straits Times*, 2009a) CASE’s purview did not extend to academic excellence. The academic excellence component “was supposed to be looked after by a council. However, that council did not materialise, to my knowledge” (*The Straits Times*, 2009b). In order for the audit to

be done properly, the regulatory agency has to determine what it means by ‘quality of the courses’ and to implement appropriate procedures for the evaluation. The neglect of the private education sector in the past had unwittingly contributed to uneven quality of education provision, causing the sector to be stigmatised.

In PEIs, profit is a common efficacy indicator of success. The power of economic interests, particularly short-term economic interests, overriding everything else is not to be underrated. The profit motive may lead to larger minimum class sizes as a means to save on costs but at the expense of effective learning for students. The Singapore government realised that the lack of intervention and awareness of the sector could jeopardise Singapore’s reputation as a notable education hub. In December 2009, the Singapore parliament passed the Private Education Act to tighten up the standards and accountability of the private schools in Singapore. The Ministry of Education put in place a robust regulatory framework through the enactment of the Private Education Bill. The regulatory framework includes the mandatory Enhanced Registration Framework (ERF) and the voluntary EduTrust Certification Scheme for PEIs that intend to recruit international students. The regulatory framework replaces the SQC and CaseTrust education schemes.

The Private Education Act 2009, through the ERF and EduTrust, requires the PEIs to comply with prescribed criteria that have a strong association with procedure and process development. For example, criterion 3.3.1 of the EduTrust requires the PEIs to have “a comprehensive monitoring process for all engaged recruitment agents to ensure that they conduct proper pre-course counselling and abide by the code of conduct”; “procedures to verify that agents have conducted proper pre-course counselling”; and “procedures to take appropriate, timely and necessary action when any agent violates the contractual agreements and/or code of conduct” (Council for Private Education, 2009, p. 42). The Examination Board is responsible primarily for the *development* and implementation of the *processes* [emphases added] that govern the conduct of formative and summative assessments, duties of invigilators and markers, appeals with regard to examination and assessment and security of the examination papers and answer scripts (Section 16, Private Education Act, 2009). There is no mention of the Board’s responsibility for confirming the progression and award decisions.

The regulation has shaped the industry structure. The number of PEIs shrank significantly from about 1,200 establishments in the early 2000s to about 300 players today. Although financial support to comply with stricter standards was available to the PEIs in the transition period, some of the players have exited the industry for failing to meet the requirements of the newly established regulations². There were others who did not expect to reap a positive net benefit by undertaking the costly exercise to comply with the ERF and EduTrust criteria. The massive amount of data and reports for the CPE incurs a huge opportunity cost on the private education institutions, particularly the smaller players, with a large amount of resources devoted to the cause. Unlike higher education learning institutions such as public universities, private schools face a more serious constraint of limited resources as a consequence of their profit orientation.

Moving ahead

This section discusses the next step forward. The CPE current framework has set the minimum quality floor, a necessary step to legitimise the existence of the PEIs and to enable the PEIs to operate. The CPE prescribes procedures and processes for the PEIs to deal with matters such as student contracts and the recruitment of lecturers. Auditing is largely confined to making sure that the processes and procedures are in place, and looking for evidence of compliance.

But the bar has to be raised. It may be thought that a procedure-based approach makes processes more consistent but, instead, this makes it harder for the PEIs to improve. The processes are standards that are applicable to all PEIs, and they are insensitive to the sector's large diversity. The current regulatory system is not able to accurately reflect quality differences among the PEIs that have nevertheless met the ERF requirements, offering no added benefits to PEIs that have emphasised academic excellence more than others. In addition, the current framework does not indicate the duration of PEI certificate and diploma courses nor does it require the PEIs to submit student guides, session plans and assessment details prior to course commencement. It pays no attention to the module or programme content. There is no requirement to ensure that the assessments are appropriate at the certificate level or the diploma level. There is no check on whether the assessments have been carefully crafted to meet the learning outcomes.

Another contested CPE criterion concerns the review requirement of modules and programmes awarded by the PEIs. Criteria 5.2.1 and 5.1.2 of the EduTrust scheme stipulate the requirements for the PEIs to have a comprehensive “curriculum planning process for all the courses” (Council for Private Education, 2009, p. 66) and “review process to regularly review the curriculum for all courses” (p. 64), respectively. Without the involvement of academics who are well versed in their respective fields, which is the case for CPE, the reality is that it would not be easy for the CPE inspectors to tell whether the requirement is merely treated as a paper exercise with no real benefit. Some of the schools may have the tendency to review and change the course materials on a more frequent basis than before so as to show the authority that something has been done rather than doing so for the benefit of triggering positive students' learning experience. The main argument is that failure to plan carefully may result in less than desirable outcomes. For one thing, the resultant superficial changes in curriculum impose unnecessary constraints on the teachers especially those who are teaching on a part-time basis³. One possible reason for the failure of the innovations (i.e., changes in the curriculum) is that they are introduced into an environment that is hostile. For an innovation to survive, it needs to be carefully conceptualised and legitimated. Implementing innovation hurriedly, without careful deliberation with the stakeholders, will not bring significant benefits. Even if one is sympathetic to the arguments against the lack of reviews, it does not automatically follow that an extensive form of review would be better, although the Singapore authority explicitly assumes so.

In this regard, the standards applied by the CPE differ from the Workforce Development Agency (WDA)⁴. WDA develops the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) framework in various industries to equip students with the necessary skills

to enter and raise their productivity level in these industries. To teach WSQ modules, education providers, including the PEIs, are required to obtain course accreditation from the WDA to teach a module, multiple modules or full qualification leading to the award of WSQ Certificates and Diplomas and they must submit course lesson plans. It is mandatory for the education providers to provide course assessment plans, trainer guides and learner guides to the WDA and the materials must be developed by persons with Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment (ACTA) and Diploma in Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) qualifications. It is worth noting that WSQ courses are recognised nationwide despite the fact that the courses are run by approved PEIs as opposed to PEI courses (which are perceived to be lower in quality).

What needs to be done? For a start, it is important for the CPE to pay more attention to the academic aspects of the private education business. This should take place in full view of the fact that the reputation of the PEIs can potentially affect the reputation of Singapore as a learning destination. Promoting academic excellence has to be the focus. The CPE should recognise the different levels of complexity and degrees of achievement of the various programmes – certificate, diploma and advanced diploma levels – and specify the desired learning attributes for each of the levels. By indicating the broad knowledge and skills for each level, CPE should revise its framework to provide for the PEIs to design the course and assessment tasks that are commensurate with the expected student outcomes. The learning outcomes of each course should be explicitly identified and mapped to the graduate attributes of the institution. Similarly, the learning outcomes of each module should be aligned with the objective of the programme. Students should demonstrate the learning outcomes through the design of the module, and the latter should be reviewed periodically to ensure that they remain relevant. The PEI should be held responsible for ensuring the provisions of the graduate attributes and learning outcomes through the module and programme review exercise, and that its students have satisfactorily met the requirements prior to awarding the qualifications. PEIs must take adequate steps to comply with the guidelines stipulated by the CPE, and flag and show cause for any non-compliance to the authority.

Currently, there is no prescribed method to determine the course contact hours. As a result, the duration of a PEI diploma course can range from 6–15 months. Academic improvement calls for the PEIs to locate the load of courses by developing a credit points system. The credit points assigned to the modules should add up to the total credit points as determined by the CPE for a particular level of study. The system would allow the CPE to provide useful guidelines to the PEIs on the allocation of hours for lab activities, tutorials and lectures. The information should be published and made available to the public to allow potential students (and eventually the hiring companies) to gauge the performance of PEI graduates in relation to student learning. In designing the credit points system, the CPE has to bear in mind that the PEI Diploma is not equivalent to a typical three-year Diploma course offered by Singapore polytechnics. In most cases, PEI courses are positioned as equivalent by level to the first year of study of an undergraduate programme.

The CPE has the responsibility of ensuring that students have benefited from enrolling in PEI courses by ascertaining the true quality of private education and

identifying areas for improvement. The CPE should facilitate the process of academic reform and make certain that the changes will bring more educational gain than loss but the PEIs must lead the movement. Currently, the CPE sends inspectors to the PEIs to gather paper evidence to check whether the procedures have been complied with and raise areas for improvement for non-compliance, and there is hardly any attempt to inspect the quality and content of the programmes. Auditors who are familiar with the subject matter should be appointed by the CPE and be responsible in inspecting the relevant documents and seeking answers from students and lectures to make sure that the provisions make sense to the stakeholders and are complied with. Focusing on the product quality would not be effective if the inspectors are not able to make sense of the technical aspects of the modules.

Conclusion

The establishment of the ERF and EduTrust schemes in Singapore's private education sector was reactive in the sense that the authority recognised the need to interfere more closely after unethical practices of some private schools were exposed through the media, suggesting that pre-CPE measures were inadequate in mitigating improper practices among the private education providers. When schools made the decision to cease operation, students were left stranded, imposing on them both monetary and non-monetary costs. The scandals adversely affected Singapore's reputation as a safe place for parents from abroad to send their children to pursue their education. The number of cases of misbehaviour was actually trivial relative to the size of the industry but the perceived impact of the scandalous behaviour was so great that it led to enactment of new rules and policies that effectively affected all players.

Singaporean publicly funded universities have placed a strong emphasis on reputation building as reflected in their focus on moving up the university rankings. Safeguarding the integrity of the education sector in the city state is a priority. The government would not want any negative news or scandal originating from either the private or public education sector and, in this regard, there is tremendous pressure on the CPE to ensure that the PEIs are well run.

This paper argues for the CPE to shift its focus from process and procedures to product, to give greater assurance to students that the qualifications attained are useful and beneficial. It is perhaps, not too much to ask that the CPE establishes the standards for the PEIs to comply with regardless of whether they are concerned with the duration of the programme or with curriculum development. Sub-standard academic programmes ill-prepare students for the real world. There is no shortcut to success. If the PEI offers a diploma that falls short of the standard, the discrepancy should be easily identified by students and hiring companies. Such a level of quality assurance is necessary. I have argued here that the profit motive should not be a barrier to upholding academic standards.

Endnotes

1. The scheme was part of the Education Excellence Framework adopted by the Economic Development Board (EDB) with the aim of giving recognition to private schools that have good student welfare practices. Of particular concern, as far as CASE was concerned, was the interest of the international studies, and the student protection scheme (SPS) was specially designed to protect international students when private schools failed. The SPS was a compulsory component of the CaseTrust scheme for all private schools recruiting international students.
2. The CPE has worked in collaboration with SRING Singapore and the Association for Private Schools and Colleges offers to offer financial assistance to the PEIs in preparing and meeting the EduTrust requirements. Known as the EduTrust Support Scheme (ESS), the initiative would provide private education institutions up to S\$26,500 in grants to review and upgrade their capabilities. The grants are given in two phases. The first phase allows private schools to obtain up to S\$4,000 to engage consultants to review their systems and processes in accordance to the EduTrust regulations. In the second phase, private schools are to embark on improving the problem areas (such as curriculum development, human resource and financial management) as identified in the first phase. The schools are eligible for up to S\$7,500 for each problem area, up to maximum of three areas. See *The Straits Times*, 31 March 2010: "Private schools get help to upgrade". *The Straits Times*, 31 March 2010.
3. Hunkins and Ornstein (1989) remind us that curriculum projects may fail to take root if the innovators focus most of their energies on changing the programme while paying scant attention to the needs of the teachers. "The status quo tends to be maintained if those suggesting change have not presented precise goals of the new program being suggested – that is, have not planned adequately what the new program will look like or indicated in ways in which the new program will be superior to the existing one" (1989, p. 111). O'Donoghue and Clarke (2010, p. 54) further add that the sustainable development of education institutions involve teacher collaboration, to develop the "capacity for fresh perspectives on existing knowledge and experience' and generate 'learning among-teachers and students'".
4. Established in September 2003 under the Ministry of Manpower, the WDA trains and upgrades the Singaporean workforce.

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Diversity, social cohesion and the curriculum: A study of a Muslim girls' secondary school in New Zealand

Deborah Lomax and Elizabeth Rata

Abstract

The paper argues that the integration of faith-based schools into New Zealand's secular democratic society is compromised by the localisation of the country's national curriculum. The argument is illustrated by a small study undertaken at a Muslim girls' secondary school. Significant dilemmas were encountered by the school as it sought to align its curriculum to the liberal principles and values in the national curriculum. New Zealand, as a modern, pluralist society built on liberal principles and values, has a long tradition of integrating diverse groups in order to create a cohesive society with the education system serving as the main site for integration. The post-1990s' shift to the localisation of that system changed the nature of the integration process leading to the possibility of permanent segregation for some groups. We identify the localised character of New Zealand education through its community-responsive curriculum, rather than the existence of diverse groups themselves, as a contributor to segregation with negative consequences for the country's social cohesion.

Key words

New Zealand, curriculum, localisation, secular, democracy, Muslim, liberal, localisation, diversity, integration, social cohesion

Introduction

This article identifies how the problem of the integration of faith-based schools in New Zealand's secular democratic society (Kolig, 2009) is compounded by the 'localisation' (Rata, 2012) of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2007). The argument is illustrated by the findings of a small study undertaken at a Muslim girls' secondary school in New Zealand in 2015 (Lomax, 2015). The school was established in 2001 as a private, all-Muslim girls' school to cater for the growing Muslim community. In 2011 its legal status was changed to that of a state integrated school in order to receive government funding. The school's Integration Agreement is the Minister of Education's acceptance of the school's right to express its religion and culture in line with the expectations of the national curriculum. This requires the school to adopt a set of principles which "embody beliefs about the nature of the educational experience and the entitlements of students; they apply to all schools and to every aspect of the curriculum" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). According to these principles, all state funded schools

should be aiming to “put students at the centre of teaching and learning, asserting that they should experience a curriculum that engages and challenges them, is forward-looking and inclusive, and affirms New Zealand’s unique identity” (MoE, 2007, p. 9).

However, the school encountered significant dilemmas as it sought to align its curriculum to the liberal principles and values in the national curriculum. Our purpose is to understand these dilemmas and their consequences. In order to do so we locate our inquiry in New Zealand’s historical attempts to accommodate the beliefs and practices of diverse groups, particularly in terms of New Zealand’s increasing liberalisation from the late 19th century. In 1990, a major shift from the centralised education system established in 1877 to a localised one (Department of Education, 1988; Openshaw, 2009; Thrupp, 1999) is identified as the key moment when the country’s universal curriculum underwent a profound change (Openshaw, Clark, Hamer, & Waitere-Ang, 2005; Rata, 2012). At this point, the national curriculum became characterised by an emphasis on its community-responsive (i.e., localised) curriculum in order to recognise the increasingly diverse character of New Zealand society (Siteine, in press).

The aim of the community-responsive approach is to enable schools with “strongly held values” (MoE, 2007, p. 10) to express those values “in everyday actions and interactions within the school” (p. 10). Despite the requirement that “every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of the national curriculum” (MoE, 2007, p. 37), we argue that, when a community has “strongly held values”, such alignment efforts can be unsuccessful if the community values are incompatible with the principles and values in the national curriculum (MoE, 2007). The most serious consequence for any democratic nation of this alignment failure is the segregation of an insular group from the wider society. This is the case because schools are the primary institution for the integration of diverse groups into modern, pluralist societies. They socialise children into the values and knowledge that enable them to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship and to ensure social cohesion (Rata, in press a). According to Kymlicka (2003), social cohesion includes finding ways to “reconcile the recognition of diversity with building common feelings of membership and solidarity” along with “greater public participation” for all (p. 3).

The study (Lomax, 2015) was undertaken by one of the authors in order to gain insights into how the school aligned its special Muslim character to New Zealand’s national curriculum in order to identify areas of incompatibility, if any. Material was acquired from the school’s Integration Agreement, the School Charter, and a range of curriculum policies, including the national curriculum. In addition interviews were held with a Board of Trustees member, the principal, and several teachers, including those responsible for developing the content of the school curriculum within the “flexibility when determining detail” (MoE, 2007, p. 37) offered by the national curriculum.

The analysis identified two forces which contributed to incompatibility. The first concerned the school’s faith as a set of beliefs and values promoting the Muslim way and how this posed problems for implementing the liberal principles and values stated in the national curriculum. The second dilemma encompassed the first but affected all areas of school life. It was the wider issue of the incompatibility of some Muslim values with the values of citizenship in a liberal democracy, particularly with respect to gender

equality and diversity (Kolig & Sheppard, 2006). The findings of the study suggest that it is not possible for the school to compromise in all areas where there exist opposing faith-based and secular values. This was the case despite the commitment in the school's Charter to both sets of values. The underpinning contradiction revealed in the study is, in fact, inadvertently captured in the school's Charter. This states that the school's aim is "to facilitate the development of a mature and understanding commitment to the beliefs and practices of Islam so that students will become responsible and caring citizens of New Zealand community". (Lomax, 2015, p. 5).

Although the study investigated a Muslim school, other faith-based state integrated schools have also had to navigate tensions between conservative religious communities and New Zealand's liberal secular curriculum. Indeed these tensions and the resulting compromises are found throughout New Zealand's educational history as the following section demonstrates. However, we argue that the localisation of the New Zealand curriculum in recent decades (Openshaw et al., 2005) has shifted an historically delicate balance between centralised authority and local decision-making with consequences for the way in which compromises are made and tolerance enacted. A major consequence is a change in the function of education itself. For over a century, the function of public education in New Zealand was to create an integrated cohesive society which tolerated a degree of diversity (Beeby, 1992; Butchers, 1932). In contrast, we argue that the contemporary system enables diverse localised groups to become insulated from the wider society.

We have chosen the school investigated in the study (Lomax, 2015) to illustrate the problem of localisation because it is the first state-integrated Muslim national secondary school for girls. Like other state funded schools with a special character (for example, those based on a Māori, lifestyle or religious philosophy) the Muslim school has the "strongly-held values" that are permitted to be recognised in the school's curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 10). For this reason, the school illustrates how localisation is embedded in the community-responsive character of the curriculum more widely and reveals the negative consequences that result from this.

The Muslim school in particular has a second feature which may prevent the required "alignment" of the school's localised curriculum with that of the national curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 37). This feature is the incompatibility of some Muslim values with liberal ones and the desire by parents for their children to be educated in those religious values. The matter is not the religion itself, nor the primary role of faith in the school's character, but specific beliefs in three areas. These are, first, the relationship between the individual and the group; second, the role of women; and third, the separation of religion and government.

All belief systems have a range of interpretations about these issues from fundamentalist beliefs to modern liberal interpretations. For example, among Islamic jurists worldwide there is considerable disagreement about the interpretation of *sunnah*, also known as *hadiths*, which are the statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed providing "approval or disapproval on various religious, moral, social, cultural and legal issues (Syed, 2004, p. 6). Interpretations of these areas of daily life led to the exercise of reasoning in the form of a judgement (*ijtihad*) and the development of the *hadiths*

or *sunnah*. There continues to be much debate regarding the validity of some *hadiths*. According to Noss & Noss, (1994), “Muslim liberals hold that *ijtihad* was freely resorted to when necessary, but others disagree and regard the hadith cited as questionable” (p. 607). Disagreements about the authenticity and impacts of some *hadith* such as “[t] hose who entrust their affairs to women will never have prosperity” (Syed, 2004 p.95) reported by Abu Bakr (the first Caliph following the death of Prophet Mohammed) contributes to the school’s difficulty in educating the girls who are growing up in New Zealand’s democratic society.

Like other faith-based education systems, modern Muslim education is a pluralistic mix of spaces and ideas:

Islamic schooling is today carried out by government and non-government organisations, and its purpose and organisation are matters of great debate. At the heart of the dispute lie two important questions: just what is required to live as an observant Muslim in the modern world? And who is qualified to provide instruction in this matter? (Hefner, 2007 p. 2)

The school in the study is particularly interesting because, through the Integration Agreement with the government, it has chosen to combine the teaching of an Islamic ‘way of life’ with modern democratic values and practices, guided by Muslim community views. The researcher (Lomax, 2015) wanted to know how the alignment was played out in the daily life of the school, especially as the study was the first on a Muslim school in New Zealand. In the United Kingdom, Mandaville (2007) has also identified the alignment problem in British Muslim schools. “Occasional waves of ‘Islamization,’ often at the behest of Salafi-oriented parents” have restricted the school content by demanding that “evidence from the Qur’an and *Sunnah* be used to support major points in the curriculum” (p. 231). In these cases only books written by Muslim authors were offered to students. While *Qu’ranic* and *sunnah* evidence has not been required of teachers at the New Zealand school investigated in the study, restrictions are placed on resources which can be shared with students only with the approval of the school’s Islamic character specialist (Lomax, 2015). In Australia, researchers found that:

[W]ithin the Muslim community there is a concern that their children will be educated away from Islam, because the Australian government schools reflect the separation of religion and state, and may teach values which are at variance with those that Muslims espouse, such as promoting the individual’s rights rather than those of the community; encouraging scepticism, doubt and challenging authority. (Donohoue Clyne, 1997, cited in Abbas, 2011, pp. 347–348)

Fundamentalist Christian schools demonstrate the same incompatibility between conservative religious beliefs and liberal values with respect to the three contentious areas of the community–individual relation, gender roles, and the relationship between religious authority and the authority of the state. For example, one such New Zealand school (the Gloriavale Christian Community School) educates its children into rigid gender roles with a strong vocational approach with the girls learning home-craft skills

and the boys taking the traditional male subject of woodwork. However, as a private rather than an integrated school (although with some state funding), Gloriavale is required only to meet its limited statutory obligations. These do not include adhering to the New Zealand Curriculum. Instead the school's curriculum is required to reflect the community's philosophy with its anti-intellectual, gendered focus. According to the most recent Education Review Office report (Education Review Office (ERO), 2015) "Students are well supported to learn literacy and mathematical capabilities and develop appropriate skills for life in the community".

We use the example of Gloriavale Christian School in addition to that of the Muslim school to make it clear that we do not consider the existence of illiberal beliefs themselves to be the central problem for the integration of a modern society consisting of diverse groups. (We do acknowledge, though, that racist and sexist beliefs are still a problem.) Rather, we claim that the central problem is the negative effect on national social cohesion. This occurs when two factors act together to support each other. The first factor is the illiberal nature of a community's faith-based beliefs, *and following from those beliefs*, the community's authority to determine its curriculum according to those beliefs. Social cohesion is negatively affected when beliefs that are opposed to liberal principles are used to educate the society's future citizens. Citizenship is the political status of each individual in liberal democratic societies. In order to serve as a citizen, one must combine the moral or ethical principles of liberalism, those which justify human rights, with the rationality developed through an individual's engagement with modernity's collective representations. Citizenship requires public participation. This will only occur when individuals are able to adopt both the rights and responsibilities that come from belonging to the wider society (Rata, in press a).

The shift in the balance of tolerance towards localised community authority over a standardised national curriculum *and* the government's acceptance of this localised authority, rather than the community beliefs only, is at the heart of the problem. This localisation approach has the potential for the permanent segregation of outlier groups. "There is evidence that too strong an affiliation with an overseas cultural identity, together with a weak link to New Zealand culture, can result in a lack of participation in the host society" (Ho et al., 1999:24, cited in Ministry of Social Development, 2008, p. 36). Erich Kolig (2006, p. 53) uses the term "parallel lives" to convey the outcome of the lack of day to day integration with cultural others.

The Historical Context

In addition to the wider issue concerning fundamental normative differences between a minority immigrant group and the broader society, the study revealed the dilemma specific to New Zealand which we identified above as the localisation of the curriculum. The 1877 Education Act established a centralised public education system with a universal standardised curriculum that was prescribed for all children regardless of their social and geographical location (Beeby, 1992; Butchers, 1932; Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). From this early beginning, a degree of tolerance for a small, private, religious, school sector was included in the system. The schools in that sector were Christian, mainly Catholic, but also including various Protestant denominations. Despite this

tolerance of difference, the system's public and secular character has, in the main, ensured that education reproduces each generation into the 'collective representations' of a modern democratic nation based on the liberal principles that underpin human rights (Clark, 2005). Collective representation is Durkheim's (1912/2001) term for the shared sense of reality which unites modern societies and gives rise to a national consciousness that binds disparate populations into cohesive societies. These modern collective representations are new and multiple ways of giving meaning to social life. They mark the deep transformation from the religious to the secular and from the kin, race or cultural-religious group to the universal human being which provides the foundational principle for democratic human rights (Rata, in press a).

The role of the public education system as the main institution for modernity's cultural reproduction is particularly important given New Zealand's relative newness as a nation – its first Act of Constitution was as recent as 1852 – and its heterogeneous population. Debates at the time of the 1877 Education Act show that legislators and the public more generally were deeply aware that the new nation consisted of diverse groups, some with a history of significant conflict (Openshaw, Lee, & Lee, 1993). These included Māori tribes whose enmity resulted from the tribal wars in the first half of the 19th century (Crosby, 1999) as well as animosity between tribes that fought on the side of the colonial government and those against government forces in the 1850s and 1860s. The rapid increase in the English and Irish settler population from the 1860s brought with it the national and religious conflicts of these peoples (King, 2003). However, the secular character of the new national education system was seen as the way to move from this historical animosity to a peaceful civil society based on liberal democratic principles (Butchers, 1932). Education's role was to build a degree of unity between the diverse groups in order to ensure that succeeding generations would be integrated into a new, cohesive social order. The collective representations of this new modern social order were to be transmitted through a standardised education curriculum which would not only contribute to a united national consciousness, but would prevent the cultural insularity of New Zealand's isolated rural and small settlement communities (Beeby, 1992).

Those national self-representations have not always been fully accepted in the 140 years since the first Education Act. Various groups, both conservative and progressive, have contested the way in which the nation understands itself (King, 2003). Overall however, there has been a general acceptance of the nation's liberal ethos, if not agreement with how equitably the ensuing benefits are distributed. The principle of gender equality, in particular, has been increasingly accepted by society at large and incorporated into the education system with little resistance. In turn, this principle, along with others based on the evolving democratic ethos contribute to, and reflect, New Zealand society's liberal modern culture. A contemporary example of education's role in social liberalisation can be found in the recent acceptance of 'diverse gender' as a socio-political category. Schools are required to adopt, not only anti-discriminatory practices with respect to gender and sexuality, but to be actively supportive of those identifying as 'gender diverse'. In accordance with the 1993 Human Rights Act, 'gender diverse' is now an official category along with 'male' and 'female' in New Zealand Statistics policy (New Zealand Statistics, 2015).

The post-1980s' migration to New Zealand of social groups from non-British countries, all with considerable internal diversity, introduced a degree of challenge to New Zealand's relatively stable liberal consensus (Belich, 2001). However, people with significantly different values and practices had been accommodated before, so the idea of diversity was not considered a problem. Indeed, the term 'diversity' itself became popular from the 1980s. Its acceptance reflected the traditional tolerance towards social difference within civil society. This is captured in the inclusion of 'Cultural Diversity' as one of the eight principles or 'foundations of curriculum decision-making' in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Not only is such difference seen to be something to be accommodated, but there is general consensus that diversity adds 'colour' and vitality to civil society, rather than threatens liberal values.

The steady liberalisation of New Zealand society has long been accompanied by government policies that demonstrate a degree of tolerance towards those groups that have been initially unwilling to subscribe to New Zealand's broad normative consensus. From the time of the 1877 Education Act, specific exceptions have accommodated such groups in addition to the Catholic school system mentioned above. The 1877 legislation exempted compulsory school attendance for Māori until 1907 in recognition of those tribes who had opposed the settler government. But it also supported the Native Schools which had been established in 1867 for those Māori who requested government-provided education. The anti-English sentiments of some Irish settlers (not all Irish immigrants were in the Catholic system) were accommodated with legislated provision for children to be withdrawn from history classes (Openshaw et al., 1993). Throughout the 20th century a range of individuals and social groups, from conservative fundamentalists to alternative types such as the 'primitivists' of the government sponsored 'Ohu' communes in the 1960s, have used the educational options of private schooling, home schooling, or the correspondence school to educate their children.

The secular character of the public education system and the provision of alternatives for the small numbers unwilling to tolerate its values meant that, for most New Zealanders, the public education system provided standardised universal education to ensure social integration. However, with the 1990 Education Act, New Zealand education took a new direction, from a centralised to a 'localised' system (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). Interestingly, such devolutionary politics were justified by both the Right and the Left. According to right-wing ideas, the lessening of government control would encourage privatisation. Left-wing advocates in contrast, promoted devolution in terms of community-controlled participatory democracy. The former were informed by neoliberal ideas of the time; the latter by the identity politics of the same decades (Openshaw, 2009). Opposing ideas, but similar methods, and both with unintended consequences.

With the 1990 Education Act, policies and procedures concerning all areas of school operation were to be developed at school level. The Ministry of Education now provides broad statutory requirements which serve as guidelines to Boards of Trustees and principals who are responsible for each school's governance and management. This local decision-making extends to what actual knowledge is taught, not just to pedagogical matters. The *New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007) is a framework, not a prescribed

syllabus. It contains principles, values, competencies and achievement objectives which “each Board of Trustees, through the principal and staff, is required to develop and implement [as] a curriculum for students in years 1–13” (p. 44).

It was the central place of ‘principles’ and ‘values’ in the curriculum which justified the focus of the study in the Muslim girls’ school on the compatibility between the school’s principles and values and those stated in the national curriculum document (MoE, 2007). The research asked: to what extent were the identified dilemmas ‘fixable’ at school level and to what extent were they about the deeper issue of compatibility between the school’s Islamic principles and values and the liberal ones in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (MoE, 2007)? This led to the broader question about the extent to which diversity can be successfully accommodated in the education system if the values of a diverse group are incompatible with New Zealand’s liberal consensus. Given New Zealand’s tradition of tolerance, itself a liberal value, were the checks and balances that have been developed prior to the 1980s’ localisation processes sufficient to ensure the integration of non-traditional migrant groups into the nation’s broad democratic consensus?

In the centralised education system established in 1877, the school was considered to be, rather than a reflection of home values, the place where those values may well be challenged as children acquired new knowledge that might not have been available to their parents. Indeed, education was seen to be about ‘change’, providing opportunities that might take children away from their communities (Rata, 2012). We have mentioned above the alternatives to the public system for parents who were unwilling to expose their children to the change that comes from outside influences. However, the post-1990s’ shift away from a prescribed national curriculum to one developed by and for the community within a national framework has altered the balance between local communities and the national social order in favour of community influence (Siteine, in press). In this community-responsiveness climate, local groups have considerable autonomy to transmit values and principles to children which might, or might not, reflect liberal democratic values and ideas. It is within this localised schooling context that, in 2011, the growing immigrant Muslim community in Auckland converted a formerly private all-Muslim girls’ school to a New Zealand state integrated school eligible for government funding.

Curriculum principles

In New Zealand an ‘integrated’ school maintains its special character but is state-funded and required to adhere to the national curriculum. This means adopting a set of principles which “embody beliefs about what is important and desirable in school curriculum – nationally and locally” including “affirm[ing] New Zealand’s unique identity” (MoE, 2007, p. 9). Selecting the curriculum content to be taught and ensuring its coherence through all levels of schooling is the school’s responsibility. Accordingly, “each board of trustees, through the principal and staff, is required to develop and implement a curriculum for students in years 1-13 . . . that is underpinned by and consistent with the principles . . . and in which the values . . . are encouraged and modelled and are explored by students” (MoE, 2007, p. 44).

The study focussed on how the Muslim girls' school undertook this task of curriculum development by investigating the alignment between the school's curriculum and the national principles. These principles are: "High Expectations, Treaty of Waitangi, Cultural diversity, Inclusion, Learning to learn, Community engagement, Coherence, and Future focus" (p. 9). The principles are supported by the values of "excellence, innovation, inquiry and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability, and integrity" (p. 10). Space requirements in this article mean that we have selected the three principles of 'Coherence', 'Cultural diversity', and 'Inclusion' to discuss here. These principles have been chosen because they presented the most difficulty for the school as it considered what is *halal* (acceptable) or *haram* (forbidden).

Before discussing the three principles we note the strange interpretation by the *New Zealand Curriculum* of the concept 'principle'. A principle is a proposition. It is the premise from which beliefs and values are justified according to a line of reasoning that can be analysed for its logic. The *New Zealand Curriculum* uses the term 'principle' for what are in fact 'actions', 'qualities' or 'states', a practice which tends to conflate a proposition with a final 'state', 'action' or 'quality'. The meaning of the proposition and its justification can be lost in this conflation leading to conceptual confusion. (In the final section we note a similar conceptual confusion concerning the term 'community'.)

The Principle of Coherence

According to the 'principle' of "Coherence" "the curriculum offers all students a broad education that makes links within and across learning areas, provides for coherent transitions, and opens up pathways to further learning" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). The intention is that students are able to learn about a subject, say Mathematics or Music, and proceed in a coherent manner from beginner to advanced levels so that knowledge acquired in one year provides the platform for more advanced knowledge in subsequent years.

However, the study found that there are problems with ensuring that a subject studied at one level could be taken at a more advanced level or that parts of the subject could be studied at all. Level Five of curriculum area, 'The Arts – Dance' states that students will "compare and contrast dances from a variety of past and present cultures and contexts" (MoE, 2007, n.p.). The following extract from an interview with the principal identifies a dilemma faced by the school:

Introducing Music and Dance but ensuring that the music and dance movements are not contradictory to the special character requirements. In trying to implement NZC subjects like Music, Art, Drama and Dance are areas where overwhelming majority of the parents exercise their rights under the Human Rights Act to withdraw their daughters e.g. the curriculum requires students to play a musical instrument but the parents do not want their daughters to play an instrument. (Lomax, 2015, p. 4)

Ignoring, for the purposes of this article, the limited interpretation of the Human Rights Act in this statement we draw attention to the curriculum dilemma. The studied school's Islamic precept of forbidding (or restricting) music, dance and art (where

its intent is to entertain or amuse people) is a basis of real concern for the school's community. Although not all Muslims share this interpretation, the school's stance has meant that Music, Drama and Dance are not offered beyond year 10. Below these years, the Achievement Objectives in the national curriculum enable the school to limit itself to community-approved music, drama, and dance. The Dance Achievement Objective at Level Two states: "Students will identify and describe dance in their lives and in their communities". By not providing Music, Drama and Dance beyond year 10, the school avoids confronting the Objective at Level Six (year 11) which would expose the girls to other cultural forms. At Level Six: "Students will explore, investigate, and describe the features and backgrounds of a variety of dance genres and styles" (MoE, 2007, n.p.).

Literature, health and physical education, and science were other subjects that caused alignment difficulties as the school attempted to develop its curriculum. According to one of the teachers interviewed in the study:

In English, it is difficult to select appropriate texts that avoid forms of sexuality, curse words, blasphemy, and in some cases violence. These are threads of social experience and social phenomenon the English curriculum seeks to address, to prepare students for a life in NZ. [The school] faces the challenge of how to still achieve this in a special character context. (Lomax, 2015, p. 16)

Another teacher referred to the effect of attempts at compromise on the teaching of English:

English is not as enriched as it should be due to censorship issues. Students also need more choice and to acknowledge the presence of different world views. They should know why they have chosen an Islamic one – and not just because they were raised Muslim, but because they actively choose and seek out Islam. International literature that extends beyond time and culture should be re-integrated, including classic novels within English. (Lomax, 2015, p. 6)

Topics in Health and Physical Education such as sexuality, body care and physical safety were a point of contention amongst the school community, itself a very diverse group containing conservative through to more liberal parents. New Zealand schools are required to develop a curriculum at Level Five (year 10) concerning personal growth and development based on the Achievement Objectives stated in the national curriculum document. Accordingly: "Students will – Describe physical, social, emotional, and intellectual processes of growth and relate these to features of adolescent development and effective self-management strategies" (MoE, 2007, n.p.). The school has attempted to meet this objective by introducing 'wellbeing' and 'puberty' into its 2015 Health Curriculum on a trial basis for years 7–10. This followed consultation with the community and approval from the Board of Trustees.

Science provided another example of the ways in which the school attempted to align its curriculum content to the principles, values and specified outcomes of the national curriculum. The 'special character' page in the school's science curriculum refers to the

historical and modern day scientific influences of Islam in education:

Islam has had a long and important history in the advancement and understanding of modern Science, with many highly-regarded and pioneering scientists being Muslims. It is expected that students will be exposed to and encouraged to learn about these important Muslim scientists within their learning programs. The special Islamic character of [the school] is to be promoted within the Science Learning Area, with the values of the Quran and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to be integrated within teaching and learning programmes. (Lomax, 2015, p. 39)

Individual teachers are considered to be central to interpreting the way the Islamic character will be incorporated into the school's teaching and learning programmes:

Teachers of Science are expected to familiarise themselves with the boundaries of Islam, with regard to dress, conduct, and propriety of Science learning contexts. This should ensure that teaching and learning programmes in Science are culturally and Islamically appropriate and that contentious issues are taught factually and dealt with sensitively. (Lomax, 2015, p. 39)

However, there are science topics where the integration of the two world views is not possible. The national curriculum specifically includes 'Evolution' as one of the Achievement Objectives for science learning at all six levels. Levels One and Two (years 1–4) require that:

Students will recognise that there are lots of different things in the world and that they can be grouped in different ways. Explain how we know that some living things from the past are now extinct. (MoE, 2007, n.p.)

By Level Six (year 11), the Evolution Achievement Objective states that "Students will describe the basic processes by which genetic information is passed from one generation to the next" (MoE, 2007, n.p.). In order to find a way through this dilemma, the school's Science Curriculum directs teachers to lead discussions about genetics, human reproduction, and human evolution with:

A discussion on the Islamic ideology of Creationism and the schools' subscription to it as opposed to the ideology of Evolution needs to occur with students prior to the teaching of Evolution or Human Evolution. (Lomax, 2015, p. 40)

The 'Principle of Cultural Diversity'

Schools are required to develop a curriculum which "reflects New Zealand's cultural diversity and values the histories and traditions of all its people" according to the "principle of cultural diversity" (MoE, 2007, p. 9). This requirement is acknowledged in the school's Charter as one of its priorities.

Accordingly:

We will be guided by the following priorities:

2. Respect for the diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of NZ people, with acknowledgement of the unique place of Māori, and New Zealand's role in the Pacific and as a member of the international community of nations.

(Lomax, 2015, p. 43)

However, one of the teachers interviewed in the study identified issues which showed incompatibility and contention:

These issues usually emerge in the content. For example, I find I cannot teach Māori tradition without alluding to the gods of different domains. It can become very difficult to teach some of our girls how to show respect towards others['] religious practices when they have been raised to believe that there is only One God. (Lomax, 2015, p. 9)

The school did create opportunities for its community to be involved in culturally diverse events. However, even here the cultural separation of the sexes in public events means that a large number of school events are attended by only mothers and male siblings under the age of six. One very popular event is the annual International Cultural Day where students were supported by parents to create costumes, design culture-specific art and food in preparation for the event. Several teachers interviewed in the study said that students practised dance movements enthusiastically to ensure they put on the very best performance for their mothers and younger siblings. The teachers explained that all aspects of each cultural experience must be approved by the school to ensure the experiences students are exposed to are not *haram* (forbidden in Islam). However, this event appeared to be the one day in the school year where the incompatible views towards music, dance and art were relaxed in order to recognise other peoples' cultures.

On the whole however, the school community has chosen to take on a more fundamentalist approach towards these areas of the school curriculum. The predominant view is that these activities:

Contravene the [families] religious upbringing. Rather it is, based on obligatory precaution, forbidden absolutely, if the student has reached the age of maturity – except if he has a valid reason for approving of it; for example, if he follows a mujtahid who allows it. In the latter case, nothing prevents him from allowing his child to take part in [such activity].”
(Al-Islam.org, 2015 cited in Lomax, 2015, p. 53)

In line with this approach the principal said that the school has adapted the Music and Dance curriculum to make it more acceptable for parents by “Introducing Music and Dance but ensuring that the music and dance movements are not contradictory to the special character requirements” (Lomax, 2015, p. 53).

The need to compromise was also recognised by a teacher interviewed in the study:
Islamic education is going to need to make compromises. Our girls face too much censorship, too much sheltering from the realities of NZ society. They even face sheltering from Easters and Oriental social phenomena – and this is disadvantaging them greatly. (Lomax, 2015, p. 42)

Like the principal, this teacher sought to find a way to deal with this incompatible and contentious issue by referring to Islam itself:

I have informed students that in the time of the Prophet (saw) he allowed the Christians and Jews to practice their religious beliefs and made it illegal for them to be harassed. This practice continued for many years after he (saw) died into the time of the Caliphate such as Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn abu Talib (ra). (Lomax, 2015, p. 9)

The ‘Principle of Inclusion’

The curriculum is non-sexist, non-racist, and non-discriminatory; it ensures that students’ identities, languages, abilities, and talents are recognised and affirmed and that their learning needs are addressed. (MoE, 2007, p. 9)

In terms of the Inclusion principle there is no matter more fraught with difficulty than that concerning the requirement that the curriculum content be ‘non-sexist’. We have referred above to New Zealand’s highly progressive position in matters of gender and sexuality, therefore it is not surprising that it is in this principle that the extent of the problem emerges. That problem we identified in the introduction as the dissonance between a liberal civil society and a community based on religious values that are required to be recognised in the community-responsive character of New Zealand’s national curriculum.

Parental expectations for the girls’ futures are either study at a tertiary institution or early marriage. According to a teacher interviewee:

Islamic success is not measured like Catholic schools. It differs because the Muslim community come from different cultures or countries. Each country measures Islamic success in a variety of ways that differ from one Muslim country to another. For example, getting married early is considered an Islamic success in some countries and not in others that have more westernised influences or values. (Lomax, 2015, p. 58)

As the first country in the world to legislate the female franchise (in 1893), New Zealand has a history of active feminism and regards itself as a world leader in gender equality politics even if the reality does not live up to the ideal (Locke, 2016). Education has long been the site where girls and women are encouraged to become leaders and to achieve in all fields. In the 1980s a “sustained challenge” (Allen, 2009, p. 121) was made to conservative discourses by the feminist movement including the development of

such initiatives as a ‘girl-friendly’ science curriculum. The study found that the Muslim school wrestles with this matter more than any other. The school motto for example, “Educate a Woman, Educate a Nation” contradicts the *hadith*, “Those who entrust their affairs to women will never have prosperity” (Bukhari, 1973, cited in Syed, 2004, p. 123).

According to Shah (2016), “Socially constructed discourses of family, izzat, segregation, the ‘good Muslim woman’ and others validated by vested interpretations further complicate the challenges for Muslim women aspiring for leadership roles and positions” (p. 10). Conflicting values expressed through interpretations of certain *hadith* (*sunnah*) and captured in the school motto may create a real sense of identity confusion for some girls, in particular if they form bonds outside their own cultural community. One of the study interviewees describes the personal challenges she believes the Muslim girls experience at the school:

Students face sometimes extreme personal challenges that may bring shame to them and their families. Even when a student perseveres through this, they are not supported to share their story due to notions of shame. There are internal aspects of the Islamic experience that [the school] is passing up in favour of looking good to the community. This does not reflect the reality of our students lives – and, again, does them a disservice. (Lomax, 2015, p. 19)

Despite these findings, ERO, the statutory body which monitors schools to ensure compliance, was able to make the claim that the school’s curriculum:

. . . is now appropriately aligned to The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) as a key requirement for all state integrated schools. The school’s curriculum now provides a clear balance between its Islamic special character and the learning areas of the NZC. (ERO, October, 2015)

In addition, ERO stated that:

School leaders and the Board of Trustees are working well together to achieve their vision for students as high achieving, proud and successful (Muslim) women in New Zealand society” (ERO, 2013).

However, the study’s findings did not support ERO’s conclusions. Instead they showed that the Islamic faith does impose restrictions on the school’s ability to provide the “rich and balanced curriculum” required by the New Zealand Curriculum (MoE, 2007, p. 37).

The ERO’s reports about both the Muslim school investigated in the study and the Gloriavale Christian school to which we earlier refer illustrate the extent to which the Review Office and the Ministry of Education privilege community beliefs. This is despite the New Zealand Curriculum claiming that schools must provide an education that will create “lifelong learners” who are “literate and numerate, critical and creative thinkers, active seekers, users and creators of knowledge, and informed decision makers” (MoE, 2007, p. 8). This privileging of local communities over national society is not confined to religious diversity. Rata and Tamati (2013)’s study of the ERO reports of kura kaupapa

Māori schools (Māori language and philosophy schools) showed similar findings with respect to those reports. Despite the legal requirement that the kura “are required to ensure that students acquire skills for effective communication in English” (ERO, 2007, p. 19), “a study of 25 kura kaupapa Māori ERO reports written between 2005 and 2009 found that only 3 provided information on the teaching of English” and that the information was “minimal” (Rata & Tamati, 2013, p. 267).

Conclusion

The study identified two interdependent issues that concern New Zealand education and the society more broadly. The first was the difficulty in aligning some of the school’s Muslim beliefs with the principles and values in the New Zealand curriculum. This was regarded as a factor common to other conservative school communities that justify their values and practices according to faith-based tenets. We identified three areas where these values are not within the degree of toleration that liberal democracies may allow to illiberal practices. The areas are: firstly, the relationship between the group and the individual where individual rights are subsumed by group rights; secondly, gender role differentiation; and thirdly, the conflation of religious and political authority. The second issue identified the ways in which the global process of localisation (Rata, 2012) has taken the form of community responsiveness in New Zealand’s national curriculum. While the intention is to accommodate diversity within the unity of the broader society, we have argued that the approach has the potential to create a number of unintended outcomes. These include increased group segregation and providing the justification for a group’s insularity.

We have shown how New Zealand has navigated the delicate balance between the recognition of diversity and the requirements of social cohesion by allowing a degree of tolerance for difference while, at the same time, using the education system’s standardised national curriculum to integrate succeeding generations into society’s modern collective representations. However, the shift to localisation has disturbed this balance in a fundamental way. The problem of diversity in education that we have identified in this article is not the existence of faith-based schools, whether Christian, Muslim, or another type. Nor is it the existence of diverse communities themselves. The problem we have identified is the privileging of local control of the curriculum over society’s authority for how it imagines itself. This idealised image takes the form of values and principles that justify social practices. Each generation encounters these values, principles and practices at school. The society’s cohesion depends upon the extent to which the very principles and values that justify that cohesion, principles such as human rights, equality, and individual freedom, are accepted by all members of the society. In turn, that acceptance depends upon whether or not children encounter the principles in the first place (Rata, in press a).

We have mentioned above how the term ‘principles’ in the national curriculum document is used to refer to ‘states’ (for example, ‘diversity’ and ‘coherence’) instead of acknowledging the nature of principles as propositions. Similarly, the concept ‘community’ is used in the national document in a way that conceals its complexity and allows for all its referents to be regarded as ‘communities’ when this is not the case.

According to the national document, “communities include family, whanau, and school and those based, for example, on a common interest or culture. They may be drawn together for purposes such as learning, work, celebration, or recreation. They may be local, national, or global.” (MoE, 2007, p. 12). The referent ‘local community’ is referred to in the same way as the ‘nation’. However, they are fundamentally different social units. The localised community of a family or a religious-cultural group is a singular unit. This means it is created by internal bonds and status relations. Its distinctive character is made visible by distinguishing the group from other groups in ways that heighten the differences. Because this contributes to strengthening the internal bonds it is important for groups that wish to maintain their special character to emphasise this difference from others. In contrast, the modern nation is pluralistic. It is comprised of many ‘singular’ groups; this is what makes it a diverse society. However, its very existence depends upon creating sufficient unifying cohesion, something which requires integrating those singular groups into a whole which is more than the sum of its parts.

A pluralist society which fails to achieve a sufficient level of integration so that it is structured as a new ‘whole’ will fragment into its parts. The role of public education in modern societies is to achieve that integration by creating a shared self-image or identity. This identity comprises the collective representations which Durkheim (1912/2001) understood to be the means by which the new society of modernity could recognise themselves as different from the traditional world. However, the use of the term ‘community’ in New Zealand’s curriculum for both a singular group *and* a pluralist society conceals the fundamental difference between a social group within a society and the society itself. The latter integrates many groups in a new social structure. This conceptual confusion contributes to the difficulty in identifying the nature of the problem concerning curriculum alignment that we have sought to analyse in this article. However, identifying these conceptual confusions has enabled us to understand the curriculum-alignment problem as one of localisation, or the shift of authority for social identity from the broader society to its constituent groups, and not the existence of any particular groups themselves.

The need to place localisation as the ‘problem’ explains why we looked at New Zealand’s history as a pluralist settler society to ask how the country used education to integrate its diverse groups in the past. We referred above to the small ‘outlier’ groups such as the primitivists who established rural communes in the 1960s and who were able to be accommodated through home schooling provisions. Other groups, especially in the three decades following the 1877 Education Act were granted time to adjust to the new social order. These included some Māori tribes as well as those rural families who objected to the Act’s compulsory requirement. We also mentioned the 19th century Irish Catholics who were permitted to establish their own schooling system but, and this is a significant point, who were required to adhere to the prescribed standard curriculum (Butchers, 1932).

This historical analysis enabled us to identify the shift to localisation that was institutionalised with the 1990 Education Act as the significant ‘moment’ which changed education’s role in the integration process. There are several consequences. The singular unit, whether a Muslim, Christian or culture-based school is able to

strengthen its internal coherence by claiming authority for its beliefs and practices and by emphasising its difference from other groups. Given that the difficult task for any modern pluralist society is to find ways to integrate these groups into the wider society, any processes that strengthen singularity and weaken integration can only make the task more difficult. In response to this problem, Spoonley, Peace, Butcher, and O’Neill (2005) have made a case “for adopting social cohesion” as a “key policy focus” saying that, “while social cohesion has appeared in some policy documents, there has been little public discussion and certainly no consensus” about what the concept means (pp. 107–108). The recognition of the need to discuss the matter and, in particular, to discuss the meaning of the very concepts which enable us to discuss such important issues is one we share. Our intention has been to draw attention to the central role of education in the social cohesion discussion.

The function of education in modern societies is to serve as the main institution for social integration. We argue that this purpose must precede the recognition of diversity, because without a cohesive society with institutions that create and guarantee human rights and democratic practices, such ‘secondary’ liberal values and behaviours have little relevance. Our intention in this paper has been to place the analysis of the Muslim girls’ school and its efforts to develop a school curriculum within the larger context of education’s role in modern societies. We have argued that the nation’s social cohesion is achieved by socialising each generation into society’s collective representations; those values, principles and practices that are represented in its national identity and which provide the means by which each person links him or herself to that identity. This requires a universal standardised curriculum that is available to all children in all communities. This primary function of the education system may be put at risk when a national curriculum becomes localised as is the case in New Zealand.

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Academic Literacy Development: University Students' Perceptions and Experiences of English Academic Writing in Southeast Asia

Anna Wing-bo Tso and Joan Sau-kwan Chung

Abstract

To provide a closer look at the learning of English academic writing in the context of higher education in Southeast Asia, this article, as an account of a small-scale case study, focuses on the learning that took place at a large Southeast Asian public metropolitan university. Year 1 English as a Second Language (ESL) students who completed the foundation English academic writing classes were surveyed and interviewed. Findings from the opinion survey, focus-group interview and course evaluation results revealed that most ESL university students believed the English academic writing course they took at the university failed to provide them with discipline-specific, discourse-based training. This suggests that writing courses should be designed specifically for each discipline so that different skills with regard to the academic writing discourse of different disciplines can be taught and learnt. However, because of limited manpower and resources at the university, making this kind of change to writing courses would be very challenging.

Keywords: Academic literacy, academic writing socialization, English for academic purposes (EAP)

Introduction

English academic writing proficiency is crucial for all university students both locally and worldwide. Students who are keen on academic writing are more likely to perform well in their studies and become high achievers in higher education. Indeed, as Lillis (2001) explains, "writing is a key assessment tool, with students passing or failing courses according to the ways in which they respond to, and engage in, academic writing tasks" (p. 20). Numerous recent international research studies have also shown a significant positive correlation between students' English language proficiency and academic achievement (Kaliyadan et al., 2015; Sahragard, Baharloo, & Ali, 2011; Orgunsi & O., 2009; Wille, 2006; Woodrow, 2006).

In Southeast Asia, most tertiary institutions run compulsory foundation English academic writing courses for year 1 students. Unfortunately, English academic writing is often mistakenly viewed as a "transparent medium" (Lillis, 2001, p. 30), or a set of core skills transferable to all contexts and all disciplines. Often, English academic writing, which is a specific type of cultural practice, is taught as generic study skills which are

detached from authentic writing practices within different academic disciplines. As Wingate (2006) notes:

[T]he widespread approach to enhancing student learning through separate study skills courses is ineffective, and that the term ‘study skills’ itself has misleading implications, which are counterproductive to learning...learning how to study effectively at university cannot be separated from subject content and the process of learning. (p. 457)

While atomized skills – such as summarizing, mechanical drilling of grammar, spelling, and punctuation – are included in the syllabuses of most generic writing courses, domain-specific training¹, genre-based, writing instruction is often left unexplored. One reason for this is that the one-size-fits-all course setting, like the one in our case study, is not compatible with the contextualized teaching approach. Despite the best efforts of teachers and learning material designers, one English writing course cannot include a wide variety of text types and discourses from all disciplines. Consequently, academic writing courses that employ the simplistic, study-skills approach fail to enhance university students’ competency in English academic literacy, and, in particular, academic writing.

The mastery of English academic literacies means much more than just grammatical accuracy. As recent research has suggested, academic literacy is discipline-embedded and discourse-relevant (Hill, Tinker, & Catterall, 2010; Kapp & Bangani, 2011). Also, academic writing is a socially situated activity (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009) that involves meaning-making, identity forming, and power relations between writer and reader (Lea & Street, 1998). To help students improve their English academic writing, first of all, teachers of English academic writing need to have a better understanding of their students’ literacy backgrounds (Stein, 1998), and academic literacy practices (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). Secondly, to help their students gain better access to the discourse community, universities are advised to create a literacy environment (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006). More specifically, universities need to allocate resources in developing English academic writing courses. Offering the traditional one-size-fits-all grammatical and lexical deficit model may not be sufficient. A range of discipline-specific academic writing courses should be tailor-made and offered to students coming from various disciplines. Last, but not least, it is recommended that subject teachers work closely with English teachers to provide ESL learners with opportunities to develop their socio-cultural sensitivity. Teaching writing strategies for various discipline-specific genres should not be the task of English teachers alone.

In the small-scale case study reported on in this paper, mixed research methodology (e.g., Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) was used to examine the students’ actual experiences when taking the compulsory foundation English academic writing course. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the course evaluation results of 250 students, the questionnaire survey of 26 students, and a series of in-depth student interviews. Based on the findings of the case study, this article reveals the academic literacy practices of ESL students studying at university. It sheds light on the major challenges ESL students in Asia might face as they engage in English academic writing in the first term of their university studies.

Literature Review

The mastery of academic writing has long been viewed as “the hallmark of success for any student at university” (Jones, 1999, p. 37). However, research indicates that university writing courses offered by language centres or English departments often fall short of the writing demands expected in various academic disciplines (Grabe, 2001). Students need much more than grammatical knowledge and mechanical skills training. The development of academic literacy, now an increasingly popular area of study, comes under the spotlight. The notion of academic literacy can be understood in terms of Bourdieu’s (1973) concept of ‘capital’. He theorised three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural (Bourdieu cited in Richardson, 1986). Economic capital refers to wealth and property; social capital refers to membership in a group or class (p. 248); and cultural capital is the ability to understand the conventions and ‘play the culture game’. It consists of “familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use ‘educated’ language” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 145). The use of ‘educated’ language, or linguistic capital, requires more than mastery of generic language skills. As Flowerdew and Miller (2008) state:

What is at stake with the concept of linguistic capital is not simply access to the grammar of the language, but rather language use, the ability to produce the appropriate expression in an appropriate way in a given social context. People who do not have access to particular social milieux are unable to acquire the appropriate linguistic capital. (pp. 202–203)

In alignment with Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, Lyotard (1984) borrowed Wittgenstein’s term ‘language games’ to explain the multiplicity and heterogeneity regarding linguistic capital:

Wittgenstein ... focuses his attention on the effects of different modes of discourse; he calls the various types of utterances ... language games. What he means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put. (p. 10)

In other words, acquiring linguistic capital and developing academic literacy go far beyond the mastery of grammar and generic study skills. One term may have multiple different meanings in various disciplines, or language games. To understand and use a term or an expression, one needs to be familiar with the system of concepts in the specific domain, examining how it functions and how it is utilized in the particular discourse. For example, a successful English academic writing course for medical professionals should familiarize students with the field-specific “cultural assumptions and practices” (Hyland, 2009, p. 47) so that they can enter the professional community. As Lave and Wenger (1999) note, learning takes place through legitimate peripheral participation in social practice.

However, designing and conducting effective English writing courses is not an easy task. The study described in this article started by reviewing the setting of the existing English writing courses at a selected university to ask: (i) How much do the university

teachers know about their students' academic literacy levels and learning needs? (ii) How effectively have the English academic writing courses offered helped students to understand and construct discourse knowledge in their own academic discipline? Also, more specifically, (iii) Does the English writing course setting allow academic contexts, discourse-based material, practice and guidance that communicate discourse knowledge in different fields, including economics, psychology, politics and public administration, electronic and computer engineering, etc.? The following section provides an overview of the compulsory foundation academic writing courses currently offered by a university in a large Southeast Asian city.

Background: Academic writing training at a Southeast Asian city university

As with many other government-established universities in the region, the university in the study has been offering a generic English academic writing course compulsory for all undergraduate year 1 students, whose attendance is noted at every lecture and tutorial for 13 weeks. Students taking the foundation writing course are from a wide range of degree programs across various academic disciplines, namely psychology, economics, politics, social studies, language and translation, creative writing, cinematic design, animation and visual effects, electronic engineering, as well as computing and information technology.

English fluency, linguistic accuracy and generic study skills are the main concerns of the foundation English writing course. Thus, the general topics covered are:

- analyzing and interpreting assigned essay topics;
- researching for information and integrating ideas;
- summarizing and paraphrasing ideas;
- documenting sources properly for academic purposes, and
- writing structured academic essays.

Recent studies about academic English writing and learners' literacies, including Flowerdew and Miller (2008), Grabe (2001), Hyland (2003) and Prior (2006), have criticized such generic writing courses for not acknowledging socio-cultural contexts and individual learners' needs and motivation, as well as for not acknowledging the variation of writing tasks required by different disciplines.

Research methodology and findings

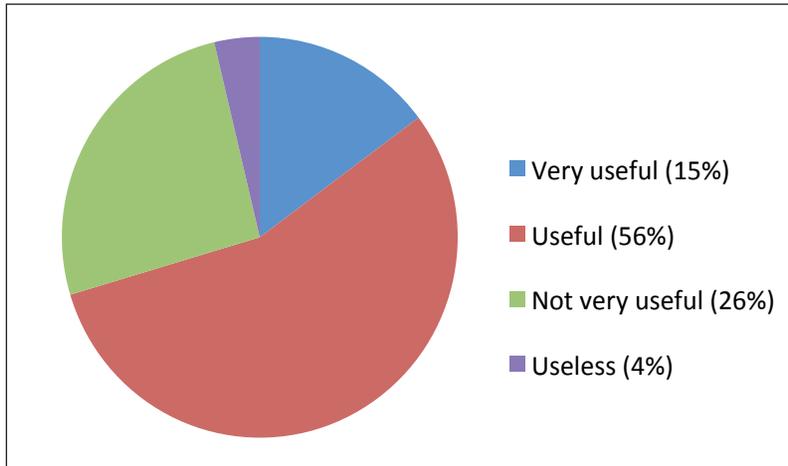
The case study used mixed methods to investigate the learners' perceptions and experiences in the English academic writing courses at the university. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to provide a fuller picture of the situation:

i. Small-scale questionnaire survey

During the study break in mid-October 2015, a survey was conducted with 26 year 1 ESL students (aged 17–19 years) taking the compulsory English academic writing course in the autumn term in 2015–2016. The participants of the opinion survey were all students majoring in social studies. Cantonese was their mother tongue, whereas English was their second language.

When asked to rate the effectiveness of the writing course in developing their academic writing skills, more than a quarter of the participants rated the generic course as “not very useful” (26%) and “useless” (4%).

Figure 1: Student ratings of the effectiveness of the writing course in developing academic writing skills



While 71% of the respondents found the compulsory foundation writing course useful in terms of grammar and vocabulary revision, over 30% of the students reflected that it was not useful in helping them understand the assessment criteria of the written assignments in their academic discipline. Less than 35% of the students agreed they were aware of the markers' expectations when working on the written assignments in their academic discipline.

Moreover, the respondents claimed that the writing course did not provide the essential training needed in their major courses: 73% of the students frequently needed to write reports (e.g., an account of a conducted experiment or a survey), and about 60% of the students needed to do statistical presentations (e.g., an account of numerical data) in writing. Yet, students seldom had the chance to explore skills for report writing and statistical presentations in the foundation writing course. Rather, they were only trained to write summaries, to paraphrase, to write essay plans and essays on general topics.

ii. Focus-group interview

A focus-group interview with five student interviewees was conducted in the last week of the autumn term. After taking all the classes and completing all written tasks (all of which were in-class written assessments, most respondents commented that they did not feel that they were learning much new knowledge from the compulsory foundation English academic writing course. Some considered that the course should have been more genre-based or theme-based:

“The good thing is that we can make a revision of what we have learnt in secondary school such as grammar. But most of us have already learnt those, so there is boredom.”

“I think using a genre-based approach is more interesting for us to learn. It is a good method.”

“Theme-based approach will be better. It will be easier to focus on several topics”.

iii. End-of-course evaluation result

Before the last lecture of the foundation English writing course, an end-of-course evaluation form was given to the 250 students. While more than 80% of the students agreed that the learning objectives were explicit, clear and logical, when asked what improvements they would suggest for the course, a number suggested that it should be more subject-specific. They wanted the writing course to be specifically tailor-made for their particular disciplinary studies:

“Can be more narrow [sic] that the information of the course can be more fit in to the specific subject.”

“The content should be different for different major students.”

“More related to my major.”

“More specific – in accord to different majors of students.”

“The course is too general. Different major requires different writing style. This course is not specific enough.”

“The course content need[s] to be specific to help different schools students [sic] to write their essays. Let them know their essay requirement and how to write it.”

From the data obtained from the questionnaire opinion survey, the focus-group interview, and the end-of-course evaluation results, it is found that the one-size-fits-all course framework in the existing academic writing course has a number of drawbacks, as shown in the following:

Course materials

Because of the one-size-fit-all academic writing course framework, the lecturer could only prepare general learning materials suitable for all rather than discipline-specific and genre-based course materials. Although students agreed that they did learn academic skills such as paraphrasing, summarizing skills and referencing, many reflected that the course materials were redundant:

“All the skills [taught in this course] can also be learnt from other courses.”
(A student’s comment from the interview)

“The skills I have learnt them [sic] in secondary school, the writing course just repeated what I have learnt before.” (Another student’s comment from the interview)

What is worth noting is that the redundant nature of the course could be avoided if a range of discipline-specific academic writing courses could be tailor-made and offered to students coming from various disciplines.

Academic socialization

“Academic socialization” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159), or meaning making in a specialized area requires the involvement of the specialists in the professional field. According to Wingate (2006), “reading and writing are regarded as cultural and social practices that depend on their context and tutors’ and students’ assumptions of what constitutes knowledge” (p. 464). Such academic socialization processes can successfully take place under two conditions: (1) when students can take discipline-specific academic writing courses more closely relevant to their majors; and (2) when the discipline-specific academic writing courses are taught by lecturers who are not just English teachers, but also members of the professional community. As students noted, a generic writing course without the guidance of experts was not entirely helpful:

“I know more about essay writing such as structure, paraphrasing and summarizing skills. However, it is quite difficult to learn practical knowledge.” (My emphasis; a student’s remark from the interview)

“The design of the course can improve better [sic]. For instance, it should add more relevant and practical information for my major studies. University English writing skills must not only focus on the grammar and general essay issue, but shed light on the specific writing skills of the university program.” (My emphasis; a student’s remark from the course evaluation result)

The student feedback generated from the survey, the interview, and the course evaluation indicates that there may be a need to shift the current general language approach to a more specialized language approach. We recommend, therefore, that a range of discipline-specific academic writing teaching materials be tailor-made for students studying different majors. In addition, it is advisable that the discipline-specific academic writing courses be taught by professionals who know which aspects, discourses and social practices should be included, emphasized and integrated in the writing course (Graves, 2001).

Conclusion

While this case study is small, it is supported by literature on academic literacy, evidenced by the students' perceptions of the usefulness of the English writing course, as well as the unsatisfactory students' performance. As can be seen in the table below, for three consecutive years, none of the students taking the academic writing course obtained an A grade. For three years, about 10 to 15 year 1 students failed the course, which was not the case in other foundation courses.

Distribution of Writing Course Results (percentage of examinees)

Grade/Status	Sep 2015	Sep 2014	Sep 2013
A	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
A-	0.00%	0.48%	0.00%
B+	0.42%	18.75%	1.38%
B	18.41%	48.56%	15.70%
B-	40.59%	17.31%	39.39%
C+	33.89%	11.54%	34.71%
C	15.00%	0.00%	1.65%
Re-sit	0.42%	0.48%	5.51%
Fail	3.60%	2.88%	1.66%
Passing rate	95.98%	96.64%	92.83%

Source of information: Data from the university's annual course report 2015-2016.

On the basis of these findings, it is suggested that, besides the traditional one-size-fits-all grammatical and lexical deficit model, the university might consider offering discipline-specific academic writing courses tailor-made for students from various disciplines.

However, developing new courses does require time and effort, not to mention the constraints due to limited resources and manpower. If a university were to run a series of discipline-specific writing courses for year 1 students of various majors, it is likely that the university would need to recruit a team of writing-class teachers who are both English teachers and experts in a specialized discourse. Extra classrooms and learning resources would also be needed. Such hardware infrastructure, services and resources may mean a sizeable investment of several million dollars each academic year. If budget constraints mean that currently such changes cannot be made, subject course lecturers could liaise with the English teachers to explore how they could narrow the wide gaps between what is delivered in the writing class and what is required in the disciplinary practices (Prior, 1995). Most important of all would be to develop a way to incorporate discipline-specific, genre-based materials into the writing course, despite the limitations

of the generic course structure. Academic writing support beyond the writing class could also be explored.

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Endnotes

- 1 English language training approaches can be classified into two streams: generic or specific. The former teaches the English language for general purposes, whereas the latter focuses on the learners' need for a more specialized language in the professional field, so that learners can use "the domain terminology (vocabulary, ontology)" to describe "domain concepts" and "detailed knowledge" (Tairas, Mernik, & Gray, 2009, pp. 332–333). For example, an effective English language course for law school students should be a legal-context-based course that empowers students with knowledge of the language in the legal field, assisting them in legal reasoning and the understanding of domain-specific literature, such as legal doctrines, court cases, legislation and regulations.

Teacher expertise and feedback in music composition

Ezra Bartlett and Graham McPhail

Abstract

This paper reports on how a number of students in a high school music classroom responded to the formative feedback that their teachers gave their music compositions. Given the importance of feedback in current discourses regarding effective pedagogy and assessment for learning, this study provides a much-needed snapshot of feedback within the context of high schools and the more subjective domain of the arts. Student responses to oral and written feedback were analysed by a pre-service teacher over a period of weeks by observing feedback when it was given, discussing its impact with students, and observing if, and how, this feedback was put to use in the development of the student compositions. We also note the type of feedback that the teachers gave to their students, and whether the students found the feedback worthwhile and important. We suggest a pivotal factor in the high uptake of feedback in this study was the quality, specificity, and individualised nature of the feedback that the expert teachers were able to provide for students.

Introduction

Feedback is regarded as one of the most significant pedagogical acts a teacher undertakes in the classroom. Hattie's (1999, 2009, 2011) work has generated increasing awareness of the significance of good feedback, noting that it is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. Hattie (1999) elaborates on the feedback process as follows: "The most fundamental component of teaching is imparting information to students, assessing and evaluating the students' understanding of this information, and then matching the next teaching act to the present understandings of the student' (p. 9). Moreover, the aim is to develop in students the abilities to take an active part in this process where assessment is *for* learning, rather than *of* learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Booth, Hill, & Dixon, 2014). Hattie and Timperley (2007) contend that students need three key questions addressed when receiving feedback on their work: "Where am I going?"; "How am I going?"; and "Where to next?" (pp. 88–90).

Research on feedback also suggests that a combination of both evaluative and descriptive types of feedback by the teacher creates the most powerful support for learning (Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). Evaluative feedback describes an overall, generalised evaluation of how things are going, such as, 'You are making good progress'; or 'Well done so far'. Descriptive feedback on the other hand provides more specific detail. As Sadler's (1989) conception of effective feedback suggests, the student needs to be made aware of the gap between the current and desired levels of performance in relation to

a task, and to be given specific guidance on how to close that gap. In the case of music composition, descriptive feedback might focus on such details as harmonic rhythm (the rate and logic of the chord changes in a song) or the appropriateness of the musical material given to a specific instrument and if this will work well for that instrument or not (idiomatic writing).

While such descriptions of feedback are vital to our growing understanding of its importance for learning, much of the literature seems to take for granted the significance of teacher disciplinary knowledge in this process (see Parr & Timperley, 2010, for one exception). Surely, as Taylor (2014) suggests, “without subject knowledge the teacher cannot begin” (p. 175). However, Hattie (2009) notes ‘a conundrum’: “there has been a long debate about the importance of teacher subject knowledge, with the seemingly obvious claim that teachers need to know their subject to teach it! Despite the plausibility of this claim, there is not a large corpus of evidence to defend it” (p. 113). Some studies, both more recent and also preceding Hattie’s 2009 meta-analysis, do recognise the importance of teacher knowledge in the pedagogical process more generally if not specifically in relation to feedback. For example, in a recent review, “What makes great teaching?”, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Elliot (2014) put teacher “(pedagogical) content knowledge” as number one of “six components of great teaching” (p. 2):

The most effective teachers have deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, and when teachers’ knowledge falls below a certain level it is a significant impediment to students’ learning... teachers must also understand the ways students think about content, be able to evaluate the thinking behind students’ own methods, and identify students’ common misconceptions.
(p. 2)

It is important to note that research has not found a strong link between teachers’ academic qualifications and student performance (Coe et al., 2014, p. 18). Nevertheless, Coe et al. (2014) note “an emerging body of work that can link more specific measures of content knowledge, and in particular the kinds of content knowledge that are relevant to teaching, to student gains” (pp. 18–19). We suggest that is what we see in the study reported on in this paper. Shulman’s (1987) notion of the transformation of disciplinary knowledge into a form coherent for teaching, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (or PCK), is an important concept here. Effective teachers know how this transformation or recontextualisation can be made to enhance learning. This paper provides an example of this process in action and we also point out in this case, that the quality of the feedback is reliant on teacher specialist disciplinary knowledge.

In relation to the specificity of this paper, we note four additional contextual factors in relation to teaching, assessment, and feedback within the context of secondary school music. The first is the historical problem identified generally in the music education literature that classroom music teachers are not often trained as composers, but more often as performers or as musicologists (Berkley, 2001; Winters, 2012). In addition, because composition is a relatively new component in the curriculum (appearing in the 1990s) in both New Zealand and the UK, it is an area where teachers often lack confidence in teaching it (Kennedy, 2002; McPhail, 2012, 2014; Pilsbury & Alston, 1996; Randles

& Sullivan, 2013). In New Zealand the ‘Composers in Schools’ programme assisted the transition of composition into the secondary curriculum and, today, programmes such as the New Zealand Music Commission’s ‘Musicians Mentoring in Schools Programme’ (<http://nzmusic.org.nz/education/>) and the availability of some itinerant composing teachers fulfils a similar function in providing specialist input for schools.

Our second point refers to the increased frequency of students developing stylistic expertise or ‘insider knowledge’ of certain musical genres that may be more developed than that of their teachers (Finney, 2007). This is the result of affordances of technology where students have access to copious resources for the development of their specific interests. In such cases students may be working at quite sophisticated levels with the accepted norms of a given artistic community of practice. The question then arises, what feedback might a teacher, often classically trained, be able to give if they are not familiar with the genre in which a student requires feedback? The NZMC mentoring programmes provide some avenues for teachers seeking more specialist input for students and these programmes reflect the growing importance of popular music in the curriculum. Within the world of popular music, composition and performance are very often integrated (Green, 2002). Recently, group composition has become an option in the NCEA to reflect this musical reality and Thorpe’s doctoral work considers the new and multi-dimensional challenges for music teachers in incorporating collaborative composing into their programmes, particularly for learning how to effectively assess them (Thorpe, 2015). In her review of the literature she concludes that “the summative assessment of peer-mediated, non-written, practical or informal learning for qualification is highly problematic for teachers, requiring complex practice responses and sophisticated assessment knowledge. This has not sufficiently been investigated” (p. 64).

Our third point, that we touch only briefly as it is a vast topic, is the notion of *creativity*, and in particular the challenges in relation to feedback and assessment within the more subjective domain of the arts. The importance of encouraging student self-expression while introducing students into the accepted norms and conventions of the craft is a challenging one (Lees, 2015). Lees notes, “music teachers may be caught between the romantic notions of genius, those who can see or imagine things that others do not ... and recognition that creativity can be an intuitive, and an everyday affair” (p. 44). The arts tend to be dominated by fuzzy beliefs about what constitutes an effective realisation within a domain. For example, in music composition it is often extremely difficult to identify the ‘X-factor’ in a successful piece, let alone teach for it. Nevertheless, teachers seem in general agreement that teaching the ‘basics’ of composition is certainly possible and necessary. In Lees’ study on music teachers’ views of creativity, she noted that “the teachers believed creativity needs domain knowledge for its development” and that creativity can be regarded as “the realisation of original or novel ideas or products *within the context of a creator’s experience* [emphasis added]” (Lees, 2015, p. 44).

Our fourth, contextual, point highlights the influence of the New Zealand National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) on teaching and assessment. For this qualification students gain credits from assessments from assessment units called ‘Achievement Standards’. The adoption of standards-based assessment has seen such

processes as music composition quite helpfully elaborated and defined in terms of visible (or in this case, *audible*) outcomes, such as competence with musical materials, devices, and procedures that are expected to be structured into a coherent and cohesive whole. Within the NCEA, the criteria and explanatory notes in each composition Achievement Standard, developed with input from specialists, act as an assessment guide in concert with annotated exemplars of student work. Ideally, teachers are guided in their feedback by criteria which are elaborated through use of key terms indicative of key concepts. In the case of music composition these key indicators include *generation of musical ideas* (riffs, motifs, chord sequences, ostinato, tunes), *development* (musical ideas are manipulated using compositional devices such as repetition, sequence, layering, variation of texture and timbre) and *communication of musical intent* (demonstrating stylistic assurance and flair, and communicating with impact) (for example, see AS 91271, NCEA Level 2 Composition at <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/achievements/2012/as91271.pdf>).

Inquiry Context and Aims

The aim of this study was to report on how a number of students in a high school music classroom responded to the formative feedback that their teachers gave their music compositions. The students observed were writing compositions within a high-stakes assessment context for the NCEA. In this national qualification, students accrue credits at three levels (usually over their three final years at high school) from Achievement Standards derived from dimensions of the national curriculum. Some Standards are assessed via a national examination and some are internally assessed at the school level by the teachers, as is the case for music composition. Internally assessed Achievement Standards are subject to a national moderation system where samples of work are compared to exemplars deemed to be at the national standard.

A second aim, after noting response to feedback, was to see if, and how, the students used the feedback to improve or change their compositions. By seeing feedback from the students' point of view (i.e. through how they put it to use), we hoped to identify what kind of feedback is effective in making a student think critically about their own work. As Hattie (2011) notes in relation to the literature, "specifically, it is not enough to claim that feedback works" (p. 2). Under some conditions, feedback information can have little positive effect or even debilitate performance: "When students understand their goals and what success at those goals looks like, then feedback is more powerful" (p. 4).

While there is literature that discusses giving composition feedback from a teacher's point of view, there is little to be found discussing how music students might perceive and apply (or ignore) the feedback given to them about their compositions. van Ernst (1993), Randles and Sullivan (2013), and Ruthmann (2007) all discuss the importance of teachers engaging in dialogue and giving individual feedback to students to help them improve their compositions. Atlas, Taggart, and Goodell (2004) discuss feedback more generally and also note that it is important to be aware that sensitive students may find feedback or criticism to be a negative experience, one that affects their motivation and performance. Therefore, sensitivity needs to be exerted in the delivery of feedback and

in the frequency and tone of the delivery. Hattie (2011 notes that feedback “interacts with the attributes of the learner (situational, learning, and personality)” (p. 2). Within the context of group composing, Thorpe (2015, p. 229) also notes that “adolescent identification with band membership as well as the socio-musical cultures associated with certain musical styles might mean that feedback about composing might tread upon very personal ground indeed” and her doctoral work considers student use of feedback in two varying school contexts. She found that, in some contexts, written feedback was virtually ignored by some students but, along with her teacher participants, she developed various visual/diagrammatic means to communicate progress with students. For the group composition context Thorpe (2015) developed a conceptual model that was shared with, and used by, students to assist them in assessing where they were in the process of composing in moving from ‘the messy phase’ of composing – unstructured, mucking around, jamming – to the ‘focused phase’, where decisions are taken and the piece begins to take shape. One teacher in Thorpe’s study noted that the model allowed the students to explain to him what they were doing (p. 180). There is no reason why the model could not be used in individual composing, however, it was particularly useful in the group context where creative processes may take some time to come together.

None of this music education literature, apart from Thorpe’s recent work (which is focussed on group assessment), provides any deep insight into how a student might perceive the feedback that is given to them, or how they might apply it to their work. Although there are certain measures that are used to try and objectively gauge the success of a composition, such as those found in an NCEA Achievement Standards (see above), the issue of the personal value of a composition to a student composer may be one that does not always fit well with the processes of objectivity and criticism expected in a summative, examination-type process (Lees, 2015; McPhail, 2009). In this case study the notion of objective quality is considered in relation to the relative objectivity of the criteria set out in the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) Achievement Standards (see, for example <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/nqfdocs/ncea-resource/achievements/2015/as91092.pdf>).

The questions underlying the investigation were:

- Do students’ appear appreciative of regular formative feedback given to them from teachers? Do they apply it?
- What types of formative feedback from teachers do students appear to appreciate and apply to their work?
- What kinds of feedback do students tend to ignore?
- Are students more or less receptive to feedback when they are composing music in their preferred genre? How does the relative expertise of the teacher in that particular genre affect the feedback given?
- Does the objective quality of a composition improve if and when a student applies the feedback provided to them?

We expected students to be generally receptive to feedback and apply some of what the teachers would suggest to them. In particular, we expected students to accept detailed, descriptive feedback that specifically outlines what the student needs to work on in order to improve their compositions and pass whichever NCEA Standard that

they are working towards. However, in relation to compositions written in a student's favoured style, we were less sure how the process of feedback might pan out, particularly where students perceived their teacher as less knowledgeable about the student's style of music.

Inquiry Process

The data for this study were collected by a pre-service teacher, not an academic researcher, as part of regular teacher inquiry project to inform practice. The material was adapted by the pre-service teacher (now a teacher) and his university lecturer for this publication. In the following two sections one of the authors (Bartlett) describes the process he undertook in the school.

This research inquiry took place within a classroom environment while I was on a pre-service teacher practicum in a New Zealand high school. Students from year 11 to year 13 were observed in the normal ethical practice of classroom interactions over a period of five weeks. For students in year 11, the teacher who provided feedback was their regular specialist classroom music teacher. This particular teacher has had over 20 years of experience in teaching music in secondary schools. He does not consider himself a composer, but is an experienced musician who performs in ensembles on a regular basis outside of his classroom work. Students in years 12 and 13 received feedback from a specialist composing visiting teacher (in New Zealand 'itinerant' and in the UK 'peripatetic'). This particular teacher is an experienced New Zealand composer with a master's degree in composition, and has had many works performed by ensembles both in New Zealand and overseas.

The process of observing student responses to feedback began early during the practicum. I observed seven students at year 13, four at year 12, and four at year 11. At this stage, most students throughout all three year levels had already begun writing their compositions. With the deadline for completion five weeks away, the teachers met with each student individually at least once a week to provide feedback on their progress. Before each teacher had an initial look at each student's work, I looked at what each student had done up until this point in order to make a general evaluation of each composition and determine the potential areas of their work that the teacher might comment on. I had my own experience as a composer to bring to this task, having composed and arranged works for rock, orchestral, and solo instruments as well as having some experience with sequencing software. Students gave permission to have their work viewed, but were not given any formal evaluation from me. An aim of this inquiry process was to observe the progress of student's work in a way that was non-invasive and to ensure that the feedback that students applied to their work was given by their regular teacher. However, on a few occasions, students approached me and asked for feedback, and as a teacher I felt it was appropriate to give some. This was given with the proviso that the feedback was also checked with the regular teacher.

After examining each student's composition, I observed the two teachers providing formative feedback to each student at least once weekly over the five-week period. The feedback was given verbally, with the teacher and each student sitting at a computer to review their compositions during class time. Sometimes written notes were given to

students who requested that. Every composition was being notated using Noteflight software (free, browser-based notation software) which also has playback capabilities so the student and teacher would listen and discuss the piece together. As the teacher communicated the feedback, I observed how each student reacted to the feedback given.

I would observe whether students:

- initially appeared to agree or disagree with any feedback given;
- actively engaged in discussion with the teacher and asked for advice on certain sections of their work; and/or
- whether students were visibly appreciative of the teacher providing constructive feedback.

I also observed the teacher and paid particular attention to the aspects of each composition that he commented on – whether the comments were geared towards helping improve the music from a technical perspective or from a stylistic perspective (or perhaps a mixture of both). Examples of feedback from a technical perspective, for example, included aspects such as the compositional devices used in the music, and judging whether or not the student used these successfully to meet the required standard to pass their respective Achievement Standard (e.g., looking at use of repetition, development of a musical motif, etc.). Looking at music from a stylistic perspective could include comments that are aimed at improving the music to align more closely with the style for which the student is aiming. For example, if a student had written a jazz composition, then stylistic feedback would involve comments on particular jazz idioms that the student may (or may not) have incorporated into their work (e.g., walking bass line, jazz chord progressions and so on).

At the end of the five weeks, when students were required to hand in their work, I took a look at their work to ascertain whether the students had applied any specific feedback that the teachers had given to them. I noted if, and how, the quality of work had improved for students who had applied the feedback versus students who did not apply (or applied less of) the feedback into their work. All the data gained over the five weeks were used to try and determine whether or not students are appreciative of constructive formative feedback, whether they apply the feedback to their work, and to see if the quality of their work improved.

Findings

Over the course of the five weeks, I recorded observations about the feedback that the teachers gave to the students as field notes. Both teachers throughout the inquiry sought to provide each student with descriptive and detailed feedback about their work. Both teachers referenced specific examples in each student's work and outlined ways in which the student could look at developing, improving, or changing what they had done. Both teachers also praised students on aspects that they found effective. As Atlas et al. (2004) discuss, feedback can disincline students from working on their compositions, but the two teachers in the classroom made sure they included positive aspects about the work that students had done, to which students reacted positively and found motivating. While this motivation was never explicitly stated by students, it was implied through their increased focus on their work (from knowing that they were on the right track),

coming back at lunchtimes, and approaching their teacher (and sometimes me) for more feedback. This setting up of a positive relationship acted as the foundation for more specific and 'critical' feedback.

One notable factor about the feedback that the teachers provided was the reliance on their extensive knowledge of the discipline and their capacity to provide examples for students to consider. The teachers made specific comments on how students could make their work more effective in relation to the genre and the instruments that they were using. One example was the feedback given to a year 12 student who was composing for a string orchestra. The itinerant teacher, who has composed for strings on a number of occasions, was able to comment on ways that the student could write more idiomatic string parts by utilising the tessitura of the instrument more effectively. The classroom teacher provided similar feedback to a year 10 student who was writing for a string quartet. The teacher commented on how the separate string parts of the music could interact better, and showed the student some examples of Haydn string quartet music.

A second important feature that we need to note is that this feedback was being given individually and not as a class. Hattie (2011) notes that, often when feedback is given generically as a class, most students think it does not apply to them, "given but not received"! (p. 6). In this case the feedback was specific to the student and to their task or product, and the processes associated with closing the gap between where they were at and an idealised outcome (Hattie, 2011). The way in which the feedback was provided in an on-going cycle also encouraged student self-regulation in the intervening times (see the comments above about students seeking more feedback and working at lunchtimes on their pieces).

In cases where the composition itinerant teacher did not have any particular expertise in the genre of music that a student was writing, he notably adjusted the feedback accordingly, shifting away from direct stylistic observations of the music and, instead, commented on more general aspects such as use of compositional techniques that the student could incorporate into their work. In doing so, the teacher avoided making any stylistic judgements of music with which they were unfamiliar and avoided potential disagreements with the student. The specialist composition teacher elaborated on this problem and explained to me that his approach to music that he is less familiar with is to allow the student to explain their stylistic approach. The student explains their intention behind the choices they make and relate this back to the style in which they are writing. An example of this approach during the inquiry was when the composition itinerant teacher gave feedback to a year 13 student who was composing a progressive metal piece. The teacher, with no expertise in progressive metal, proceeded to comment on the compositional devices that he observed being used effectively in the piece, and where other compositional devices could be employed. He asked the student to comment and explain why he had done certain things, such as changing the time signature in unusual places or intentionally creating clashing harmonies. The student happily explained that these are musical features of progressive metal music. Together, ideas for enhancement of the piece were discussed.

Throughout the five weeks, observing the students' reception to the feedback that the teachers gave to them yielded some unexpected findings. We had expected students to be

generally receptive to feedback, but also that students might dispute teacher's feedback on occasion, particularly given the personal nature of the composition process. However, overall, the students were very receptive to the feedback that was given to them. Most students agreed with the teacher's observations. There were no visible disagreements recorded over the five weeks. Students' reasons for this acquiescence appeared to be a mixture of pragmatism on the one hand – they wanted to get better grades and the teacher is the assessor – and respect for the teacher as a more experienced musician. Students appeared respectful of their teacher's opinions and (most likely) based on their awareness of the teachers' expertise in either teaching, composing, or both. Students did not appear visibly discouraged by any of the feedback that teachers gave to them. The students appeared to take the feedback in their stride and there was clear evidence that they applied it their work. In relation to the feedback that I provided, I noticed that there were a couple of occasions (very few) where the students had gone with their own judgement instead of my suggestions. I do not know if this was because they did not agree with the feedback, had forgotten it, perceived me as less of an expert as their 'real teachers', or the rapidly approaching deadline intervened.

Some students, especially those that appeared more self-motivated in composition, actively sought dialogue with their teachers regarding their compositions. This was particularly apparent at years 12 and 13, where some students took as many opportunities as they could to ask their teacher for any advice. This was not universal, however, with one year 13 student notably asking the teacher to not view her work on a couple of occasions when the teacher offered to take a look. In general, the students were happy to engage in additional conversation and feedback sessions with the teacher. Overall, students appeared visibly appreciative of their teachers providing feedback to them, with students often thanking their teachers at the end of the interchange.

At the end of the five weeks, I looked at individual students' work to determine whether the students had applied the feedback given. By comparing some observation notes on what the teachers had told the students to work on with the final result of their work, it became apparent that students had incorporated most of the feedback that they had received and had applied it to their work. Examples include specific key changes, changes in texture, further use of repetition, or a wider range of dynamics as suggested by their teacher. In my own judgement of the work that the students had done, when comparing the work at the beginning of the inquiry to the work that was submitted at the end, there was a definite increase in the quality of the music that was produced across all three year levels. The increase in quality, however, was more pronounced across years 12 and 13, where there was greater application of the teacher's feedback to their work. It is likely that, at years 12 and 13, the students have a better understanding of the feedback that was being provided to them. In contrast, students in year 11 have a more limited understanding of composition and music theory, meaning that the students were less likely to understand all of the feedback or perhaps be unsure of how to apply it fully or in an extended fashion to their own work. Nevertheless, the quality of work across all year levels increased.

Conclusion

This research inquiry was conducted in only one school with two teachers, so the potential for generalisation beyond this context is limited. Nevertheless, as Yin (2003) suggests, in case studies there is the potential to make analytic generalisations or generalisations *towards* theory. In other words, a “case study uses the logic of analytic instead of enumerative induction” (Neuman, 2003, p. 33). In this case, for example, it is clear that for students to accept feedback and act on it, there needs to be a positive learning environment, the feedback needs to be detailed and specific for them, and teachers need to call on a deep level of disciplinary knowledge to enable this. However, we cannot be sure how students actually *felt* about the feedback that was provided. We know it was mostly acted on but this could be for both positive and negative reasons. In summary we make the following points in relation to the initial questions:

- ***Are students appreciative of regular formative feedback given to them from teachers?*** Yes, in this inquiry, the students appeared overwhelmingly receptive and appreciative of the teachers’ feedback.
- ***What types of formative feedback from teachers do students appreciate and apply to their work?*** Students appeared to appreciate all of the feedback offered. They applied a lot of what was discussed in feedback sessions with their teachers, with senior students particularly incorporating more of what was discussed into their own work. This was descriptive feedback, in that it was specific and individualised.
- ***What kinds of feedback do students tend to ignore?*** Students in this inquiry did not (visibly) ignore feedback from the teachers, and no obvious cases of students ignoring feedback could be found when looking at their compositions after being handed in.
- ***Are students more or less receptive to feedback when they are composing music in their preferred genre? How does the relative expertise of the teacher in that particular genre affect the feedback given?*** The expertise of the teacher played an important role in determining what they commented on. The students were receptive to all feedback related to their particular genre of music when it was given, but teachers moderated specific stylistic feedback to students when discussing genres that they had little to no expertise in.
- ***Does the objective quality of a composition improve if and when a student applies the feedback provided to them?*** All students applied feedback to their work, so there was no student work to compare where the student had ignored the teacher. In all cases, the objective quality of the work had increased with more coherent, well-structured, and clearly developed pieces being handed in.

Further research into why this particular set of students were so receptive to the feedback could be conducted. Possible reasons for this could be that the students had very positive relationships with their respective teachers, which may have contributed to their openness to new ideas and feedback from the teachers. We suggest a pivotal factor in the high uptake of feedback in this study was the quality, specificity, frequency, and individualised nature of the feedback that these expert teachers were able to provide for students. There is also the students’ pragmatic motivation to apply the feedback as

it is likely to lead them to attaining a higher grade. For whatever reason, it is apparent from this research inquiry that students are potentially very receptive and open to the feedback that their teachers give to their compositions. The students were proactive in seeking advice and applied most of what the teachers had commented on to their own work, which resulted in better quality of work being submitted for assessment. This environment of positivity, along with the specificity of the feedback, goes some way towards our aim of identifying what kind of feedback is effective in making a student think critically about their own work. An area for further research could be to look in even more detail at the type of feedback teachers are able to provide, particularly where they do not have detailed, insider knowledge of the specific musical genres in which students may be choosing to compose. Overall, this study provides an example of what Hattie describes as pedagogy significant for learning: “the power of clear learning intentions, success criteria, and an enhanced frequency and appropriate feedback” (Hattie, 2009, p. 160).

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The Pacific Circle Consortium is an organization dedicated to the improvement of teaching about peoples and nations within and around the Pacific Ocean, and in Asia. From 1997 to 2004, the Consortium was an official program of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/CERI). Currently, the Consortium is an independent organization.

The purposes of the Pacific Circle Consortium are to:

- Share ideas, resources, information, material and personnel among Pacific and Asian countries and educational institutions;
- Promote internationally co-operative research and development in education; and
- Undertake co-operative development of curriculum materials and educational support services.

Members of the Consortium

The membership of the Consortium is made up of individuals from many institutions. Recent membership is drawn from countries as diverse as New Zealand, Australia, Samoa, Fiji, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, South Korea, China, Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Ecuador, Latvia, and the United Kingdom.

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Notes for Contributors

Pacific-Asian Education is an international, refereed journal that addresses issues of curriculum and education within the Pacific Circle region and throughout Asia. The journal is interdisciplinary in approach and publishes recent research, reports of curriculum and education initiatives within the region, analyses of seminal literature, historical surveys, and discussions of conceptual issues and problems relevant to countries and communities within the Pacific Circle and Asia. Papers with a comparative or cross-cultural perspective are particularly welcome.

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