



## Negotiating the Curriculum

### Looking for ‘connectedness’

The *Culturally Responsive Pedagogies Project* is a response to an urgent need for curriculum and pedagogical innovation as an antidote to appalling learning outcomes for Indigenous students and in response to super-diverse classrooms. The project is driven by concerns for developing pedagogies for student engagement through researching the theory and practice of ‘connectedness’ as a theme for both curriculum development and for pedagogy. This term ‘connectedness’, is used in many disciplines including architecture, mathematics, computing, communications, and social psychology. Of some interest to *Culturally Responsive Pedagogies Project*, sociologists use it to refer to the general wellbeing of a society (New Zealand Ministry of Social Development, 2006) and in many of the world’s ethical and religious systems, ‘connectedness’ refers to an ethic of reciprocity: ‘treat others as you would like to be treated’. In the field of education, the terms ‘connectedness’, and ‘connectionist’ (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997) are often used inter-changeably, and for the sake of this paper we want to use the term connectedness. ‘Connectedness’ has several alternative meanings including reference to connectedness to the school:

**An alternative view of ‘connectedness’, and one that we want to develop here, argues that school learning should connect to the lives of the students in meaningful and challenging ways.**

School connectedness refers to the extent to which youth perceive positive support or caring from individual adults in their school setting. Overall, school connectedness revolves around the idea that when young people consistently receive empathy, attention, and praise at school they feel a sense of belonging and support that is the springboard for healthy growth and development. (Whitlock, 2003, p. 1)

The imperative here is to alleviate youth alienation and the key strategy is enhancing relationships between teachers and students. This narrow but pragmatic view focuses attention entirely on what happens in the school community and hence depoliticises the role of schools. We do not want to underplay the need to connect young people to school life, but school is but one site in which young people inhabit. Instead we need a frame that brings into view the complex and heterogenous communities in which students live. Such a frame challenges the lack of knowledge many teachers have about those communities; a lack that unfortunately informs their curriculum design and pedagogical practice; a lack of knowledge that many students experience as either denigrating, misrepresenting or ignoring their communities; a lack that perpetuates deficit views of marginal(ised) communities.

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There are many examples of connectedness but Boomer's (Boomer, Lester et al., 1992) work on 'negotiating the curriculum' we think provides a generative frame for such considerations. To quote some of the logic of this approach:

Every day, almost every moment of their teaching lives, teachers have to make delicate choices in order to avoid the classroom equivalents of reefs, shallows, squalls and looming cliffs. In this sense, teaching has always been a matter of negotiating the curriculum'. The physical environment, the set syllabus, the nature the local community, the available resources, the school policies, and the children themselves all present challenges that must be accommodated. Teachers need artistry, experience, knowledge, and their own reliable maps to find a way. (Boomer, Lester et al., 1992, p. 32)

For Boomer, negotiating is implicit in the work of teaching. But how to make the process of negotiating explicit and curriculum focused? Boomer invoked the metaphor of composing the curriculum—the curriculum being 'a jointly enacted composition' (p. 32)—which he argues provides a frame for thinking past the idea of curriculum as pre-packaged, involving 'lock-step teaching sequences' (p. 5) experienced as 'an almost self-perpetuating chain of subjections' (p. 5). In Freire's (1985) terms, the imperative is to enable students to both read the word (official knowledge) and read their world. In a similar vein, the 'productive pedagogies' approach adopted by the Queensland Department of Education, Training, and the Arts (2006) proposes that 'students engage with real, practical or hypothetical problems which connect to the world beyond the classroom, which are not restricted by subject boundaries and which are linked to their prior knowledge' and 'has value and meaning beyond the instructional context, making a connection to the larger social context within which students live'. When taken seriously by teachers, students are given 'opportunities to make connections between their linguistic, cultural, world knowledge and experience, and the topics, skills and competencies of the official curriculum. Luis Moll and various colleagues have developed, theoretically and practically, a 'funds of knowledge' approach as a counter-discourse to scripted and over-determined curriculum designs (Gonzalez, Moll et al., 2005). Alternatively, a local literacies approach advanced by Street (1994) and Luke, Comber and O'Brien (1994) proposes the need for access and validity in school settings for vernacular literacies (McLaughlin, 1997) closely associated with subcultures that are marginal, misrepresented or absent in mainstream institutions. And in a similar vein, the 'unofficial curriculum' of popular culture and out-of school learning settings provides another productive site for ethnographies of vernacular, popular and sub-cultures that young people inhabit around and beyond school (Scherpf 2001; Dimitriadis & Weis 2001). More recently, there has been interest in 'place-based' education that argues for curriculum that enables 'students to connect what they are

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learning to their own lives, communities, and regions' (Smith, 2002). The 'multiliteracies' project (New London Group, 1996) argues for 'situated practice', or that part of curriculum that aims to 'recruit learners' previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experience' (p. 85). The idea of situated practice is defined succinctly as: 'Immersion in experience and the utilization of available discourses, including those from the students' lifeworlds and simulations of the relationships to be found in workplaces and public spaces' (p. 88). The rationale for situated practice is given in terms of the need for teachers to 'consider the affective and sociocultural needs and identities of all learners' (p. 85) understood simply as the imperative to motivate learners either through activating their curiosity or else their sense of value (utilitarian or aesthetic) for that knowledge. Shor (1988) also refers to 'situated' pedagogy', which he defines in these terms: '[t]he course is ... situated in the language, statements, issues and knowledge students bring to class. Their cognitive and social situation is the starting point, not my prefabricated syllabus' (p. 108). All of these approaches, in one way or another pursues a theory and practice of teachers-as-ethnographers and students-as-researchers. (Egan-Robertson & Bloom, 1998; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Thomson and Comber, 2003).

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