



Reading summary

Hattam, R., Brennan, M., Zipin, L., & Comber, B. (2009). Researching for social justice: Contextual, conceptual and methodological challenges. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30(3), 303–316. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596300903037010>

Educational researchers who are interested in justice often pursue the difficult task of reforming schooling. Many projects and education policies have tried and failed to increase justice for marginalised populations of students. One Australian research project that attempted to pursue justice for marginalised students was 'Redesigning Pedagogies in the North', which worked in partnership with secondary schools in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia.

The project had to struggle against a neo-conservative and neoliberal political environment, and simplistic media stereotypes that perpetuated deficit views of students. Schooling was facing multiple crises, as school populations were becoming more socio-culturally diverse, youth identities were more saturated by media culture, the youth labour market was weak, and teachers were overworked and felt unsupported. At the same time, stratification between schools was increasing and education policy was failing to prevent schools contributing to the reproduction of inequality. The researchers had to put great effort into building trust and collaboration and encouraging local ownership in a climate in which schools had reason to be cautious and defensive.

The project drew on Bourdieu's insight that people enter schooling from different structural positions and thus have different dispositions which operate selectively in schools as 'cultural capital', which reproduces social stratification. In many communities, students' lack of fit with the cultural capital that is valued by schools becomes individualised and internalised as 'failure'. This project thus focused on pedagogies that connect school-based learning with

students' own life worlds in their communities, seeking to value the knowledge that students bring with them to school.

The project also drew on the work of Lisa Delpit, whose theory of the 'culture of power' in classrooms specifies how schooling works to exclude or silence students from less powerful structural positions. Other conceptual resources used in the project included building teachers' ethnographic imagination; using family 'funds of knowledge'; vernacular or local literacies; place-based education; and the 'unofficial curriculum' of popular culture and out-of-school learning settings. The question that emerged from reflection on this large body of work was: How might we redesign curriculum and pedagogical practice to pose high intellectual challenge to learners in ways that engage their life worlds and the concerns of their communities?

The project developed a model of action research that engaged teachers and students as co-researchers of students' life-world knowledge and its possibilities for curriculum connection. It established a professional learning community of teachers and university researchers, and contributed to teachers' professional development.

Take-home messages

Local ownership by marginalised populations: Building collaboration and local ownership of research projects is important when working with populations that feel they are under excessive scrutiny or over-researched.

Responsive, contextual research design: A research design that is flexible, responsive to local needs and builds the capacity of teachers has the best chance of inspiring pedagogical change.