

## **At the altar of educational efficiency: Performativity and the role of the teacher**

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*ABSTRACT: This paper critiques the impact of neo-liberalism on post-primary education, and in particular on the teaching of English. The paper explores the implications of performativity and exam-driven schooling on the teaching and learning of poetry. The authors argue that meeting the demands of an education system dominated by technicism and standardisation poses considerable challenge to teacher autonomy and pedagogy. They also draw attention to the uncontested dominance of this social contract in education and suggest it to be a catalyst for the standardisation and commodification of knowledge that has resulted in considerable de-professionalisation of English teachers. The paper proposes that as a result teachers are confronted with the choice of conformity or resistance in their practice, and argues that counter-hegemonic endeavour is urgently needed in the drive to redress this circumstance.*

*KEYWORDS: Neo-liberalism, pedagogy, performativity, poetry, standardisation, teacher deprofessionalisation, agency.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Eisner (2004a) proposes that “the kind of minds we develop are profoundly influenced by the opportunities to learn that the school provides” (p. 13). It follows that the provision of apposite learning experiences is necessitated in the development of creative, critical, passionate and engaged minds. Teacher autonomy and commitment are central to the establishment of motivating educational experiences that foster the development of creativity and critical thinking. While exploring the identity of a teaching community committed to democratic and liberating education, Greene (2009) asserts:

I would like to think of teachers moving the young into their own interpretations of their lives and their lived worlds, opening wider and wider perspectives as they do so. I would like to see teachers ardent in their efforts to make the range of symbol systems available to the young for the ordering of experience, even as they maintain regard for their vernaculars. I would like to see teachers tapping the spectrum of intelligences, encouraging multiple readings of written texts and readings of the world. (p. 95)

Yet, within current schooling systems, the types of educational experiences, as envisaged by Eisner and Greene, are vulnerable to existing as rhetorical alone. The cultural meaning of schooling has radically changed and is now more explicitly geared to performance, results and efficiency (Hill, 2007). Performativity, it appears, has emerged as a dominant goalpost in modern schooling, often at the cost of more critical educational encounters. In cultures of performativity, value, as represented

through grades, points and quantifiable targets, holds the potential to supersede values (Ball, 2003).

Not impervious to the pervasiveness of performativity on educational ideology and pedagogy, the poetry classroom, too, has become a site for the growth of performative practice and of the narrowing of critical educational experiences (Dymoke, 2012). Within the English classroom the impact of standardisation and bureaucratic accountability are acutely felt (Hennessy, Hinchion & Mannix McNamara, 2011). In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests that for some, the poetry classroom exists no longer as a forum for ontological and epistemological exploration, but rather has emerged as a monomodal site characterised often by conformity and disengagement (Gordon, 2008b; Hanratty, 2010; Hill, 2007). Consequently, calls for the reconceptualisation of current practice, informed and advanced by a commitment to critical pedagogy to facilitate a move “beyond the methods fetish toward a humanising pedagogy” are increasing (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 408).

## **THE GROWTH OF NEOLIBERALISM IN EDUCATION**

According to Sen (2002), the contribution of globalisation to societal enlightenment, advancement and cohesion by means of travel, trade, migration, the spread of cultural influences, and the dissemination of knowledge and understanding has been unequivocal. As a result, he suggests that active opposition to globalisation is frequently contested as anarchical. Those who critique the globalisation movement, supporters argue, hold the potential to cause “irreparable harm to the progress of humanity” (2002, p. 11). Consequently, any attempt to draw reference to challenges incurred in the wake of globalisation is marginalised within cultures of “tacit obedience” to the dominant neo-liberal social contract (Biraimah, Gaudelli & Zajda, 2008).

Given that contemporary education is positioned as central to work, economic capacity, global competitiveness and national identity, it has accordingly also become an important site of policy development (Marginson, 2005). Fortified by the arguments that market forces operate in the best interests of the majority, the accumulation of wealth equates with the good life, and the belief that education must support these goals; neo-liberal ideology has emerged as largely uncontested within society (Biraimah et al., 2008).

Schools, then, as sites of social production and reproduction, have not escaped the influence of neo-liberal policy. Ostensibly situated as sites for democratic critical inquiry and holistic development, in many cases schools are now, however, more often focused on human capital development than on their foundational goals (Hill, 2007). Pressure to conform to the dictates of neo-liberalism and corporate hegemony has, according to Hill (2007, p. 207) resulted in a narrow and politicised realisation of education enforced through surveillance and the imposition of tightly monitored testing of “chunks” of knowledge deemed as suitable and conservative enough to advance the dominant culture.

Striving to meet the demands of rapid globalisation and increasing educational marketisation, performativity and creativity have become central to many educational

policy developments and reform agendas over the past decade (Craft & Jeffrey, 2008). However, as a matter of concern, Burnard and White (2008) suggest that no attempts are being made to show how and in what ways teachers promote creativity and performativity in their practice (p. 668). As a result, in many schools, bureaucratic accountability, fortified by a product-oriented agenda, yields a concerted focus on exam performativity, often limiting the potential for a broader conceptualisation of educational performativity (Gleeson & O'Donnabháin, 2009).

## **EXAM-DRIVEN SCHOOLING: THE CASE OF IRELAND**

In an attempt to sustain Ireland's position within the emerging knowledge economy, a growing culture of performativity has emerged in schools over recent years (MacRuairc & Harford, 2008). This growth has been strongly influenced by theories of human capital formation as evidenced in the ubiquity of business values emergent within this education system (Dunne, 2002; Gleeson & O'Donnabháin, 2009). A resultant emphasis on liberal functionalism, technicist outputs and pragmatic thinking has very rapidly evolved at the expense of learning processes (Gleeson & O'Donnabháin, 2009). This is most clearly evident in the points system in Ireland, which is the manner by which access to higher education is decided. This points system has in effect raised the stakes of the terminal exam, making it the dominant focal point in the latter years of post-primary schooling.

A "Commission on the Points System" was established by the then Minister for Education in Ireland, Micheál Martin, in October 1997. The brief of this commission was to review the system of selection and entry to higher education. Amongst its findings, the commission reported a narrowing of the curriculum due to a strong tendency to teach to the examination at Leaving Certificate level, rather than to the stated aims of the curriculum. It also noted an undue focus on the attainment of examination results (Government of Ireland, 1999). Within this highly competitive system, where points and attainment levels are prioritised, the pressure on schools and teachers to produce results has led to a culture of cramming, the commodification of knowledge and the conflation of educational experiences into points awarded or grades obtained in the terminal exam (MacRuairc & Harford, 2008; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Hyland, 2011).

McDermott, Henchy, Meade and Golden (2007) note that "in a performance-oriented culture, there is a pressure on individuals, organisations and sectors to engage in work that is visible and measurable, work that can be exteriorised and translated into results, so that one set of results can be measured and compared to another" (p. 248). However, the potential to meet such a requirement within the poetry classroom is limited, as poetry is rarely measurable, and concurrent pupil development is often transcendental. This poses considerable tensions for the teacher of poetry in the Irish classroom. Due to the largely ineffable nature of poetry, the technicised demands exacted upon teachers by the pressures of the Leaving Certificate exam often have a subversive effect on student engagement and the development of creative and aesthetic appreciation in the poetry class (Hennessy et al., 2011). Commenting on the inherent tensions emergent between the nature of the arts and the dominance of the technical rationalist paradigm in Irish schools, Sheridan (2002) remarked that "many of the great artists were only comprehensible long after they died; you [students]

however, have to be comprehensible by June” (p. 5). The pressures highlighted by Sheridan may well reflect the dichotomised aspirations of the poetry teacher in the current measurement-driven Irish education system, wherein depth, deliberation and criticality are often sacrificed at the altar of educational efficiency. As noted by Sternberg (2006, p. 2), many governments will advocate for creativity, yet their actions belie their words. This sentiment appears true in the case of the Irish context.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMATIVITY

The unremitting focus on standards, rubrics and measurement has meant that, in many cases, the deeper problems of schooling go unattended (Eisner 2004b). Hennessy, Hinchion and Mannix McNamara (2011) note a lack of higher-order engagement and critical thinking, in conjunction with a marked subordination of subjective engagement, in the poetry class. They contend that the demands of meeting the requirements of an education system privileging technicism and exam performance fail to provide the space necessary for critical encounters with poetry (p. 191). It appears, then, that as exam grades increase, the value of what we are testing, and the educational challenge presented therein may be concurrently in decline.

A narrowing of curriculum is also evident within the poetry class owing to the dominance of a “teach to the test” ideology. Dymoke (2001) argues that poetry has become “solely, even deadeningly, linked with written critical response on terminal examination papers” (p. 39). In addition, Gordon (2008a) highlights the issue of widespread, underdeveloped phonic understanding of poetry in the classroom. He suggests that the semiotic resource of sound is increasingly undervalued in the classroom, due to a tendency towards the “explicitly utilitarian (that is, efferent, not poetic) purposes of reading, writing, speaking and listening” (p. 228). Moreover, while working within the narrowed parameters of exam prescription, Eisner (2004b) warns that the message we send to our students is that test scores are what matters in education (p. 300). Driven by reductive outcome measures, which fail to provide space for creativity, it appears that education has lost sight of the needs of students and is failing to recognise the broad range of capacities inherent in an increasingly diverse student population (Slee, 2010).

Within cultures of performativity, where knowledge is perceived as measurable and often explicitly defined, the propensity to question, challenge and critically evaluate knowledge is arguably limited. In fact, Eisner (2004b) argues that district policies make it clear that what is tested is what is to be taught. Accordingly, Ball (2003) notes that, “the ethics of competition and performance are very different from the older ethics of professional judgment and co-operation” (p. 218). As a result, “students find ways to cut corners – as some teachers do” (Eisner, 2004b, p. 300). Of note is that this trend is not a new phenomenon in the classroom. In fact Darling-Hammond (1985) articulated the existence of this predilection over twenty years ago:

We learned from teachers that in response to policies that prescribe teaching practices and outcomes, they spend less time on untested subjects, such as science and social studies; they use less writing in their classrooms in order to gear assignments to the format of standardized tests; they resort to lectures rather than classroom discussions in order to cover the prescribed behavioural objectives without getting “off the track”; they are precluded from teaching materials that are not on prescribed textbook lists,

even when they think these materials are essential to meet the needs of their students; and they feel constrained from following up on expressed student interests that lie outside of the bounds of mandated curricula. (p. 209)

Notwithstanding historical considerations, little it appears has changed in relation to classroom practice in the last three decades. Within the contemporary poetry class, the noted trend of “corner cutting” is most evident in the pervasive use of prescribed responses or “notes”, evidence of a widespread predisposition towards standardisation and rote learning and a move away from critical thinking and inquiry (Liu, 2011; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011). Signalling in many cases the suppression of subjective response, passive assimilation and the negation of critical engagement (Zwaagstra, Clifton & Long, 2010), overreliance on prescribed notes is arguably one of the foremost threats to creativity and critical thinking in the poetry classroom. Highlighting the significance of this threat for poetry teachers in particular, Dias (2010) cautions that “poetry cannot matter when the reader’s response is filtered through or directed by the teacher’s directive questions or comments” (p. 23).

### **THE GOOD LIFE?**

Trant (1998) defines curriculum as “the story we tell our children about the good life”. Drawing on this conceptualisation, it would appear that the story generated within the poetry class is one that is narrowly defined and which rests on the virtues of individualism, competitiveness and depersonalisation. Concerted focus on measurement and testing in education has also resulted in the emergence of an affective/effective divide in which attention to the affective is perceived to exist at the expense of effectiveness in education (McNess, Broadfoot, & Osborn, 2003). As a result, meeting the demands of an increasingly product-driven educational system has resulted in affective development being relegated to that of decorative functionality and aesthetic endeavour frequently displaced in favour of prosaic standardisation (Misson & Sumara, 2005; Fowler, 2001; McCracken & McCracken, 2001).

However, despite the widespread relegation of affective development in the poetry class, cognitive development has failed to experience an inversely proportionate advancement (Hennessy, Hinchion and Mannix McNamara, 2010). Focus on cognitive development within the poetry class has been severely hampered with the onset of cultures of performativity. The skills of analytical thinking, critical questioning and reflection required for the advancement of cognitive development have been fundamentally sidelined within the poetry classroom (Hennessy et al., 2010). This movement has had a notable impact on pupil agency and voice, according to Greene (2005), who argues that teachers now “identify their students by grades and test scores; they categorise them in accord with a bell curve; they impose extrinsic standards, depriving the young of a sense of agency or the chance to think for themselves” (p. 77). According to Hill (2004) such “compression and suppression” of critical space is now all too evident within education.

## CULTURAL REPRODUCTION

Little it seems has changed since Cubberley's (1916) illustration of schooling almost a century ago:

Our schools are in a sense factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilisation, and it is the business of school to build its pupils according to specifications laid down. (p. 338)

Such imagery is paralleled in the findings of Leitch and Mitchell (2007), who found pupils' conceptualisations of schooling reflected a performance-based, "conveyor belt" approach to schooling characterised by conformity, institutionalisation and regulation. Critical of this trend, McLaren (2003) argues that the principal goal and outcome of many schools is in fact the reproduction of social structures through the colonisation of student subjectivities. Within the poetry classroom, evidence of cultural reproduction exists through the widespread repression of pupil voice aligned with the normalisation of standardising practices such as note-taking and rote learning (Goodwyn, 2012; Hennessy & Mannix McNamara, 2011). According to Hursh (2005), as calls for the advancement of economic productivity and employability intensify, education becomes less concerned with developing well-rounded, liberally educated individuals and more concerned with the development of skills required to become an economically productive member of society. In a move charged with "bordering on Philistinism" by Adams (2011), the economic goals of education appear to have side-lined social, societal and community goals (Hill, 2004, p. 509).

In addition to a marked narrowing of the curriculum, Au (2008) notes that high-stakes tests, through the structuring of knowledge, actively select and regulate student identities, and thus contribute to the selection and regulation of students' educational success. Within this context the concept of excellence pays scant attention to social differentiation and its requirements, while providing "political symbols" to assert credibility on a system based on inequality and selection (Popkewitz, 1985). Therefore, while a minority of pupils who become successfully tuned to testing regimes are successful within this system, according to Doddington and Hilton, "many of the remainder starved of interest and pleasure in learning, languish in an atmosphere of anxiety and disaffection (2007, p. ix)". This destructive consequence, according to McNeil (2009), falls most heavily on marginalised students whose entire schooling experience becomes dominated by the attempt to raise their test scores at any cost. Thus, McNeil contends, standardisation and performativity pressures shape a system of widespread discrimination.

## HEGEMONIC NATURALISATION

It would appear that one of the greatest feats of the current neoliberal movement is its largely uncontested dominance. This has been achieved in the main through the ostensible transfer of responsibility from the government to the individual (Hursh & Martina, 2003). Neoliberals advocate that neoliberalism frees the individual from the oppressive intrusion of the state, therein allowing each person to realise their own personal autonomy (Baez, 2007). For neoliberals, individuals as rational,

autonomous agents (Lemke, 2001) will act in a way which reflects equality and social justice. In the classroom this translates to the use of student-centred and democratic pedagogic practices. Neo-liberalism thus presents itself as “self-evident”, as if no alternative exists (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 29).

When presented in this manner, an often “brutal” “delegitimization of the delegitimizers” ensues (Hill, 2004, p. 514), wherein those who seek to contest hegemonic practice are frequently discredited due to their apparent contestation of absolute practice. Thus, any possible contestation against the naturalisation of a singular truth or ideology is silenced. This holds true within the Irish poetry classroom, where those who seek to contest the pressures mounted on poetry teachers and the emergent patterns of educational inequality, are silenced by reports of the “legendary autonomy” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1991) held by Irish teachers and the “a high level of trust” in Irish teachers when compared to other professions in Ireland (for example, The Teaching Council, 2009, p. 3).

According to Baez (2007), the expansion of economic rationality into cultural, political, and social spheres and the promotion of a meritocratic society is the most distinctive aspect of neoliberalism and one of its most powerful ideological tools. It is too asserted that meritocratic ideology is very attractive to the dominant classes, as it not alone justifies their privileged position in society on the basis of their natural “giftedness” but it also helps to gain acceptance for this system from the underprivileged (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Accordingly, the attributing of success or failure solely to individual ability in effect absolves the state and wider society of any responsibility for inequality in the education system (Considine & Dukelow, 2009).

## NEO-LIBERAL EDUCATION AND DEPROFESSIONALISATION

The drive towards a culture of standards, assessments and accountability in education has had a “devastating” impact on many teachers and students (Hursh, 2000). Certainly the emphasis on a performance-orientated, managerially effective model of teaching has caused many teachers to struggle with the development of wider educational goals (McNess et al., 2003; Sexton, 2007). Dewey (1986) argued that imposing an alleged uniform method for everyone breeds mediocrity in all but the very exceptional. As a result, teachers often find their values challenged or displaced by the pervasive “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 216).

Cognisant that standardisation reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools (McNeil, 2009), teachers are faced with the dilemma of conformity or rebellion in praxis. For many teachers submission to school culture prevails in an effort to support pupils to achieve the ever-increasing targets being set in national testing regimes (Greene, 2005; McNess et al., 2003). Yet, it is to be acknowledged that, “if you create a culture of schooling in which a narrow means/ends orientation is promoted, that culture can undermine the development of intellectual dispositions” (Eisner, 2004b, p. 300). Teacher acquiescence to neo-liberal agendas can therefore be seen to exist at the expense of meaningful pupil engagement and development.

Such acquiescence is not without ideological contention for the teacher of poetry, however. Hennessy et al. (2011) provide evidence of considerable tensions between poetry teachers' intrinsic and often altruistic values, and the practices required to meet the demands of high-stakes testing. This tension, termed by Ball (2003) as a form of "values schizophrenia", and by McNess et al. (2003) as "fragmented identity" (p. 248), occurs where "commitment, judgment and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance" (Ball, 2003, p. 221).

However, Hill (2004) contends that this tension is in many cases alleviated somewhat through the "discourse of professionalism". This discourse constructs teachers as committed to self-improvement, to the upgrading of skills and strategically orientated to the effectiveness of their work (p. 512). Such discourse "institutes a mentality of self-regulation by which the teachers themselves become the mechanism for legitimising the surveillance, marketisation and codification of their work practices" (Hill, 2004, p. 512). Within this process a "corrosion of character" (Sennett, 1998) is all too evident amongst teachers who are often forced to set aside personal values and beliefs in meeting the targets set down within audit cultures (Perryman, Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011).

## REASSERTING THE ROLE OF THE POETRY TEACHER

Feed imagination food that invigorates.  
 Whatever it is, do it with all your might.  
 Never do to another what you would not wish done to  
 yourself.  
 Say to yourself, "I will be responsible". (Moore as cited in  
 Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2009, p. 79)

Hargreaves (2003) argues that we are at a major crossroads in education, where teachers may "become the clones and drones of policy makers" and spend their time teaching to the test, maintaining order, and rigidly adhering to standardised curriculum scripts (p. xvii). Alternatively, he suggests, they may "reach far beyond the technical tasks of producing acceptable test results, to pursuing teaching as a life-shaping, world-changing social mission" (p. xvii). Arguing against the passive assimilation of a reductionist approach to poetry, Dias (2010) challenges us to consider, "How and why does poetry matter?" For Langer (1966) certainly, the purpose of poetry as an art form is the objectification of feeling;

The arts objectify subjective reality, and subjectify outward experience of nature. Art education is the education of feeling, and a society that neglects it gives itself up to formless emotion. Bad art is corruption of feeling. (p. 12)

Langer (1953) further asserts that, "the entire qualification one must have for understanding art is responsiveness" (p. 396). Dias (2010) too contends that, "if the poem is to matter, the reader(s) must be engaged by the poem, actively involved in remaking that poem" (p. 23). The realisation of poetry as a responsive forum and affective medium is enabled therefore "when one is reading for oneself, registering whatever feelings, associations, and memories the poems evoke, and is not inhibited by the guiding questions of the teacher or by the anticipated pattern of questions to follow" (p. 24).



Moreover, the importance of poetry as an arts-based subject in developing pupil agency is noted by Eisner (2004a), who argues that, “the arts teach students to act and to judge in the absence of rule, to rely on feeling, to pay attention to nuance, to act and appraise the consequences of one’s choices, and to revise and then make other choices” (p. 9). Such development is only achieved, however, when form and content are considered and treated as “inseparable” (p. 11). The importance of matching form to content in the case of the poetry classroom relies heavily on the relationship between the poetry text (content) and pedagogy (form). Vallance (1991, p. 163) suggests that in educational contexts, works of art and curriculum are both “artifactual”. That is to say, they are both “constructed” by individuals. In this respect she proposes that both elements act as forms of communication and transformation and both are products of a problem-solving process. In acknowledging the “artifactual” nature of both poetry and curriculum, the poetry teacher is provided with opportunity to recognise, reflect and endorse the nature of the genre.

While altruistic endeavour is widely recognised as being a central feature of teachers’ role conceptualisations, the translation of this ambition into action within the classroom is seen as contentious, particularly within cultures of performativity (Hennessy et al., 2010; Sexton, 2007). Certainly the noted ambiguity surrounding the definition of professional practice within the poetry class may exist as a mitigating factor therein and serve to further a noted sense of ontological ambiguity documented by many poetry teachers (McEwan, 1992; Hennessy et al., 2011). The imperative of listening to pupil voice was noted by Freire (1985), who advocated that, by providing the conditions for learners to display an active voice, the experiences of learners are legitimated and learners are provided with a sense of affirmation.

Listening to pupil voice and, in so doing, acknowledging pupils’ experience therefore holds much significance in reasserting the role of the poetry teacher. Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2012) highlight five key conceptions of effective poetry teaching from the perspective of the pupil. These conceptions detail the importance of a teacher’s epistemological position, the development of critical thinking and understanding, a positive attitude towards poetry, the encouragement of poetic composition and the promotion of creativity within the class. Attention to the outlined pupil requisites holds the potential to enhance engagement and advance learning in the poetry class.

In reasserting the role of the poetry teacher, the significance of teacher agency is of central importance. Hill (2007) contends that teachers hold the necessary power “individually and collectively to legitimate or delegitimize the current hegemonic project of liberalising capital” (p. 208). Noting the inherent challenge of cultural assimilation in this effort, Holloway and Greig (2011) argue that while individuals may internalise many hegemonic beliefs, they still hold the power and agency to act and make decisions that will influence their own lives and that of others. Acknowledging and acting within the “spaces” present for re-imagined educational experiences, while breaking through “spaces of silence” in order to communicate a common goal, is therefore central to becoming an initiator of new beginnings (Greene, 2005). Therefore, it follows that encouraging teacher agency in the drive towards challenging the noted consistency and strength of unquestioned adherence to conventional practice in the English classroom is now an educational imperative in

the counter-hegemonic struggle (Holloway & Greig, 2011). The concept of praxis bears significance here, as praxis is conceived as a reflexive, self-creating and self-generating free human activity:

All human activity is understood as emerging from an on-going interaction of reflection, dialogue and action. All human activity requires theory to illuminate it and provide a better understanding of the world. Within critical pedagogy, all theorizing and truth claims are subject to critique. (Darder et al., 2009, p. 15)

A strong emphasis on informed inquiry and critique is also aligned with praxis. Darder et al. (2009) assert that praxis is impossible in “an undialectical vacuum driven by the separation of the individual from the object of their study” (p. 13). Within such a dichotomisation, Freire contends that both theory and practice lose their power to transform reality. Separated from practice, theory becomes “simple verbalism” and separated from theory, practice becomes ungrounded activity or “blind individualism” (Darder et al., 2009, p.13). Developing a model of praxis, whereby teachers might engage in teaching in a reflexive way, cognisant of their role in the creation of social voice and culture, holds much potential in the drive towards educational advancement.

## IDEOLOGICAL REDRESS

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
(Thomas, 1952, p. 18)

According to Freire (1970), social transformation is the product of praxis at a collective level. It follows that action, not only at a school level, but in tandem with a concerted rejection of reductionist practice within colleges of education, is called for in contesting hegemonic practice within the poetry classroom. Confronting practices which give sustenance to inequity, marginalisation, bureaucratic models of accountability and depersonalisation requires the collective appropriation of agency. It also necessitates passion for the possibility of a critical pedagogy in uncritical times (Greene, 2009). Yet, a focus on pedagogical redress alone, which may result in the “mere removal of constraints or mere relaxation of controls” (Greene, 2009, p. 95) is inadequate.

Given that pedagogy is often developed within a sphere of political and social agendas, challenging endemic hegemonic practices within the classroom requires action which transcends mere pedagogical re-evaluation and enters into the realm of ideological redress. Lipman (2009) argues that a change in the discourse of and about education is necessitated in order to achieve this goal. She argues that neoliberal educational discourse removes responsibility for inequality from the state and transfers it onto parents, students, schools, communities, and teachers. Accordingly she advocates resistance to discourses of “equity” as tied to “individual responsibility”, “efficiency” as vindication of standardisation, and the use of “business metaphors” such as accountability, quality control and standards (p. 366). The pervasive use of such discourse arguably redefines the role of education as the development of necessary skills and dispositions for the capitalist labour market. In

this context, the meaning of a “good school” is redefined into technical and narrowly instrumental terms (Ball, 1997). Such a restricted definition of schooling, according to Giroux (2009), strips education of a democratic vision where citizenship and the “politics of possibility” are given serious consideration (p. 443).

Teacher education is well placed to tackle technicist discourses in education. Harris (1994) contends that it is still possible for teachers to become agents within education and resist acting as “mere managers of day to day activities imposed from beyond the school” (p. 115). He asserts that it is possible for teachers “through their discourse and interventionary practice in the ideological and political determinants of schooling to promote empowerment, autonomy and democracy” (p. 220). Rock and Stepanian (2010) stress the necessity for teacher educators to help prospective teachers develop their professional voice as collaborative agents of change.

In order to act as agents of change, pre-service teachers need to recognise the political nature of education and the reproductive nature of schools (Bartolomé, 2009). Hill (2002, 2003) suggests that the provision of critical education programmes at third level may assist in the development of teachers as skilled, transformative intellectuals. At this level, opening up critical spaces in initial teacher education where students can engage in ontological and epistemological exploration, would serve to create space for the counter-hegemonic struggle. Such critical space holds the power to transform discourse in an education system which often fails to afford the majority of students opportunities to study the lives of others, much less the opportunity to study their *own* lives (Gabbard, 2003).

Reaffirmation of the value of a “humanising pedagogy”, where students cease to be commodified and treated as “objects” and still enjoy academically beneficial and rigorous education is also required (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 344). Greene (2009) argues that to humanise pedagogy and treat students as individuals “is to affirm our own incompleteness, our consciousness of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be tapped, possibilities still to be opened and pursued” (p. 95). In the establishment of this model, Macedo (1994) posits the benefits of an “anti-methods” pedagogy. This approach to teaching

refuses to be enslaved by the rigidity of models and methodological paradigms. An anti-methods pedagogy should be informed by a critical understanding of the sociocultural context that guides our practices so as to free us from the beaten path of methodological certainties and specialisms. (p. 8)

Within this context, teachers are encouraged to avoid the uncritical assimilation and utilisation of pedagogy, curricula and texts. Rather they are encouraged to cultivate learning environments informed both by action and reflection. Engaging in this reflective approach, teachers are enabled to adapt and develop teaching methods appropriate to individual learning contexts and cognisant of sociocultural considerations. In so doing, this approach affords space for teachers to consider the experiences of pupils that can serve to enhance or reduce the possibilities to humanise education.

## CONCLUSION

The establishment of a learning environment which affords attention to the learning experience of students is not a simple task. Yet, it is a necessary one. Contemporary education is failing students in many respects. There exists an urgent need to counter many established educational practices, such as the uncritical adoption of standardisation, passive assimilation, methodological rigidity and suppression of voice. The silence of assent is no longer acceptable. Countering hegemonic cultures is made possible through critical pedagogy. A critical approach to the development of students as independent thinkers, who hold the ability to assess and determine their own development would be well situated as an educational imperative. Greene (2005) calls for a new type of teacher, one who can be an initiator of new beginnings. She asserts that “to act at a beginning is to move towards possibilities, to live and teach in a world of incompleteness, of what we all are but are not yet” (p. 80). Establishing oneself as an initiator of new beginnings requires ideological as well as pedagogical commitment. It requires a pedagogy reflective of a mature epistemological and axiological foundation. Commitment at this level requires not only advancement in the way educational aims are regarded; it also requires advancements in student engagement and thinking, and assessment strategies for both teachers and students (Eisner, 2004b).

Educational reorientation as proposed here is not beyond the bounds of possibility. It is aligned with commitment, enthusiasm, a passion for knowledge and above all recognition of the needs and values of others. Hanratty (2008) notes that poetry and its rewards can be elusive (p. 156). The same may be asserted of engendering critical pedagogy in current schooling structures. Yet, he notes, “there is always the possibility that, looking into its deep well, one will ultimately spot, and, perhaps, grasp the quartz of truth” (p. 156). The role of a teacher transcends a technicist approach to teaching and learning. The promotion of critical thinking, autonomy and reflexivity is particularly important. Commitment to the promotion of a democratic learning experience which values and recognises the needs and aptitudes of all, remains the central responsibility of the teacher. Beginning this journey for many will present challenge and require committed vision. The potential rewards, however, will sustain and advance the pursuit of this journey.

This capacity to always begin anew, to make, to reconstruct, and not to spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live as a process – live to become – is something that always accompanied me throughout life. This is an indispensable quality of a good teacher. (Freire, 1993, p. 98)

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