Prospective teachers' perspectives on teaching and social justice

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This article reports on a study into the ideological beliefs of first year prospective teachers. Here ideologies are understood as expressions of specific 'world views' and certain collective interests. Data were drawn from tasks that attempted to get students to position themselves relative to and reflect upon questions and propositions related to social justice as it applied to education. It was found that most students work with a variant of liberal ideology, emphasising individual autonomy, a capacity for self-assertion and the fulfilment of native potentials. While expressing a concern about inequality and misrecognition, student responses also provided insights into the limits of liberal approaches to social justice, these arising from an underdeveloped sense of the dynamic tension between society and individual.

Teacher perspectives, social justice in education

INTRODUCTION

As lecturers in an undergraduate teacher education programme we aim to encourage students to engage critically in, and with, the worlds in which they live and work. We consider that for educators generally, and teachers in particular, such a critical capacity is vital. Broadly put, education is not simply imparting knowledge about things. It is an inherently political process that actively works for certain ends, or futures, over other possibilities. For us one such end is social justice where education is directed towards the attainment of a better, more open and humanly possible world. We agree with Ayres and his assertion that education and schooling are contested arenas of both hope and struggle:

> … hope for a better life and struggle over how to understand … and achieve that better life. … At that moment we realize that no teaching is or ever can be innocent – (we then understand that) it must be situated in a cultural context, an historical flow, an economic condition. Teaching must be toward something; it must take a stand; it is either for or against; it must account for the specific within the universal. (Ayres 1998: xvii – xviii)

This paper reports on a study into the beliefs of 535 first year prospective teachers. These students studied in two compulsory first year topics; a sociology of education topic entitled 'Key Educational Ideas' and a philosophy of education topic entitled 'Ways of Explaining Education'. Data were gathered from two sources for this report. First, student reflexive journals that were part of their assessment in the sociology of education topic were collated and analysed, and second student responses to weekly propositions about education were collated and analysed. Roughly, these data give us both qualitative and quantitative aspects to understanding how this

group of prospective teachers think about teaching and education at this time in their teaching careers.

In the first section of the paper we outline the theoretical idea of 'ideology'. 'Ideology' is the concept we use to describe the dispositions and attitudes that these students have to teaching and education. The notion of 'discourse' is also sometimes used, however we do not go to any great lengths to distinguish between the two concepts and their theoretical and political differences. Our primary aim is to describe the student's responses, and their naturalised ways of understanding and explaining key ideas in education. We then outline the study and go onto describe and make sense of the student responses in the second half of the paper.

Ideology and Prospective Teachers Ideas about Teaching and Education

As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper teaching and education are shaped by politics, or more precisely, by one's beliefs, values and attitudes to teaching, learning, students, schools and other key ideas within Education. These beliefs and values arise from someone's social background and cultural experiences within particular historical and cultural contexts to describe the student's responses, and their naturalised ways if understanding and explaining key ideas in education. Taken as those deep and often unquestioned assumptions about the world, ideologies are vital to understanding students' dispositions to teaching and education. While ideology is generally recognised within the social sciences as "one of the most equivocal and elusive concepts one can find" (Larrain 1979: 13), we take that our ideologies are the foundations from which practical engagements with the socio-political world emerge and are justified. In this sense, ideologies – or, more particularly, political ideologies – are not dispassionate theories but sets of collective beliefs that come to pass as the common-sense bases for sensible action.

Ideologies are to be understood in a positive sense: as expressions of specific world views and certain collective interests. In short, ideologies are not irresistible forces but emergent features of specific historical and cultural conditions. Likewise 'discourse' refers to the sense of ideas and networks of practices that we take for granted and use habitually to make sense and to act in the world. The strength of this idea over ideology is that it gives us a sense of the relationship between the agent, or the individual and their ways of understanding themselves and their action in a global context. In this sense individual beliefs are part of the broad networks of ideas that inform elites and institution as much as less powerful peoples and groups throughout culture.

Hence, as we look at the student responses we are both considering their local and individualised dispositions to teaching and education but also thinking to some extent about how they fit within, inform and are informed by broader cultural networks of meaning and practice.

THE STUDY – BACKGROUND AND METHOD

This research is based upon data collected from students in two large, compulsory, first year prospective teacher topics undertaken as part of the Bachelor of Education at Flinders University in South Australia. The topic 'Key Educational Ideas' is an introductory sociology of education topic that attempts to generate awareness of the social and cultural aspects of the field of education, from the classroom to educational policy. The topic implicitly addresses issues of social justice; that is, questions of social and cultural difference are considered in relation to issues of inclusion, access and the distribution of knowledge and resources. Social justice in this topic is considered in its breadth, with the aim being to help students begin to understand the contested character of education and just teaching practice. From this topic we collected and analysed materials taken from student reflexive journals that were part of their assessment. From 535 students 60 journals were analysed. The cohort include students undertaking Bachelor of Education degrees in junior primary, middle school and secondary teaching and cover students studying arts and science in more general degrees. Of the journals collected there were 27 male

and 33 female responses. Twenty-nine responses were collected from students studying junior primary teaching, 17 middle school and 14 secondary school responses.

The topic 'Ways of Explaining Education' introduces students to a number of philosophical positions concerning the nature and purposes of education. It aims to develop students' skills in identifying the raft of assumptions that inform their standing views on what education is and ought to be about human nature, childhood, the individual and the collective, morals, and in critically reflecting on the relative merits of these through engagement with others holding to more or less different views. From this topic data were derived from student responses to weekly propositions about education arranged in terms of Likert scales.

Both of these topics attempt to develop reflexivity, an awareness of asymmetries in the distribution of life-chances and power, and promote sensitivity to difference in prospective teachers. The instruments from which our data are derived were components of their assessment for these topics. These did not seek out right or wrong answers to content driven questions but rather attempted to get students to position themselves and reflect upon this positioning on questions and propositions related to the students own sense of social justice as it related to education; for example on the issues of collective influence, the cultivation of the self (both for students and teachers), the good social order and deviations from this, individual and collective responsibility and their limits, equality and sameness (or identity) and difference. They thus also served as a useful source of insights into the as yet largely unquestioned opinions and thoughts about education and teaching held by these students.

Here we are particularly interested in how the student through their responses mediates the social context and the individual, and in a more abstract manner the dynamic of structure and agency. These ideas are mediated through notions of equality, order, difference, culture and power and social justice at the sites of education, teaching, the self, and the student or childhood more broadly. Australia is a liberal democracy, and is dominated by the ideological traditions of Europe and North America. One of the key tenets of liberalism, which we are seeking to explore in this article, is the embodiment of individualism. The implications of individualism, as an ontology, demonstrate particular discourses of the individual, responsibility, action, social influence which are deployed through key ideas in education, and used as ways of explaining education and the role of the teacher. These ideas have implications for what we term broadly as 'social justice', that is the ways that prospective teachers see their place in addressing questions of disadvantage and privilege in the education system.

Perspectives and Ideologies: Making sense of the responses

What insights into the ideological predispositions of the 2006 cohort of first year pre-service teachers can give a deceptively fair appearance from our data? The first, very general impression that emerges from student self-identifications is that the greatest number of these people subscribe to what, in lay terms could be described as a 'nice liberalism'. What do we mean by this?

Entries in the reflective journals support a distribution of particular ideologies. When presented with a range of educational ideologies - conservative, liberal, social-democratic, socialist – and asked which they identified with most closely, the predominance of students opted for a liberal position, quite often tinged with social-democratic and even, though more rarely and only lightly, socialist hues. The following quote is typical of the most common responses:

> I find myself agreeing with Liberal perspectives…….Each person is different and therefore will achieve different outcomes from education. By seeing everyone as individual, the main purpose of education is to better that person, rather than society……By helping an individual to work to his/her potential the outcome of class divisions in society may be reduced.

Here the individual is positioned front and centre of consideration, with the social only emerging subsequently, and secondarily as a derivative of individual action. We can recognise here a number of key characteristics of a standard liberal world view; the naturally unique and sovereign pre-social individual voluntarily entering into relations with other individuals in the course of realizing their potential (*in lieu* of the more classical self-interest), and the good social order forming spontaneously from the aggregation of individual interactions. When ideas taken from the social-democratic or socialist traditions are introduced these tend to be grafted onto this basic liberal rootstock, as evidenced in the use of the language of equal opportunity.

Thus for example:

> I find myself agreeing with the social democratic ways of education…..all people should be given the same opportunities despite their birthright and the state should help in ensuring there is equal opportunity

> I find myself agreeing more with socialism, but with a lean towards liberalism…..equal opportunity, equal access and inclusivity……are all important but the socialist also takes the notion of 'equal worth' to mean 'equal power'…..It doesn't support power or privilege of some if it means the majority of others suffer.

We can note at this point that there were far fewer takers for the type of hard-core neo-classical economic liberalism, that which would place education in the marketplace with consumer choice presented as the truest expression of individual freedom. Nor for the type of social conservatism, with whom it often keeps company in contemporary debates, emphasising discipline, traditional values and a curriculum filled to the brim with 'real', standardised and testable knowledge.

Hence the designation 'nice liberals': liberal in the emphasis on maximising individual autonomy, a capacity for self-assertion and the fulfilment of the native potentials of all. 'Nice' in the sense of an awareness of and concern about the ways society can and does frustrate and injure the capacity to individuate, and that it may do so more for some than others – and in the roseate view that through a bit of tinkering with our existing arrangements for living together (equal opportunity) these accidents or oversights might be overcome.

Too often absent or underdeveloped, however, is a clear sense of the ways socio-cultural contexts condition and suggest prevailing interpretations about what it means to be an individual, and hence how one ought to go about the task of constituting oneself as an individual; or of the ways the manner and methods through which people respond to this task affects the structure and ambiance of the society we share. That is to say there is a common difficulty in grasping how the uneven distribution of material resources, power and respect, and as such significant differences in practical capacities to individuate, results from systemic contradictions rather than deficits in the individuals and groups most adversely effected by these. This in turn impacts upon where people draw the lines demarcating what they see as the outer limits of their legitimate responsibilities.

This general impression should not come as a surprise. When asked, in their journals, to reflect upon the kinds of literacies and other forms of cultural capital that supported their transition through schooling many either identified explicitly as middle class (a very Australian tendency, see Pusey, 2003), or they described features typical of a middle class habitus (educational/managerial/professional parents who encouraged them to read and have high expectations of themselves, sufficient income to attend good schools where teachers and students shared a similar background and so forth). It might be said that that ideal of the freestanding, self-realising individual has always sat quite comfortably with or comes more naturally to those whose position in the social order allows them credibly to believe that in many important respects they are their own boss, the authors of their own destiny.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION A MEDIATOR OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

From the journal responses we have understood our students as presenting with a largely naive form of liberalism, which demonstrates some conception of responsibility to others but without a strong sense of the social and cultural forces which shape responsibility, for both the individual and the social. The discourse of individualism here delimits their capacity for any sophisticated notion of the social. We further elaborate this understanding by considering responses to the educational propositions in the Ways of Explaining Education topic.

Under this heading we paired subjects' scaled responses to propositions concerning the aims of education (from the Ways of Explaining Education topic) and the importance of justice relative to efficiency and productivity with journal reflections on the role of education in society and, more specifically on the relative weight that should be accorded individual fulfilment over the needs to secure the conditions for a viable workforce.

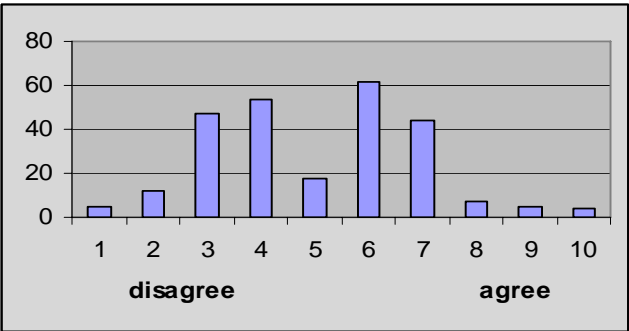The distributions of rank scaled responses are summarised in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

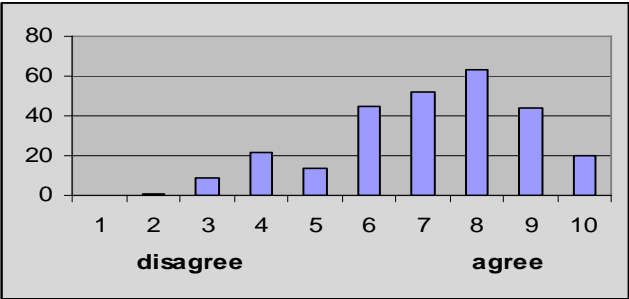**Figure 1: Education's main aim should be the transmission of community norms**

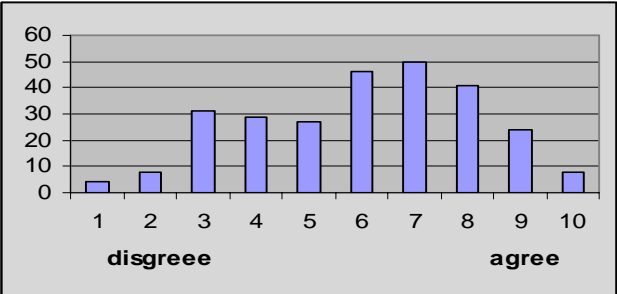**Figure 2: Education's main aim should be the fulfilment of the individual student**

Figure 3: Justice is more important than efficiency, productivity and prosperity

In Figure 2 we see what appears to be a significant divide, though not extreme (it gathers around the median point), over whether the main aim of education ought to be the transmission of community norms. Figure 3, however, would suggest that the type of norms many subjects supporting this proposition had in mind were inclined towards those that valued individual

fulfilment. In the journals we find something similar taking place. Here there are some takers for what we might call a conventional even conservative view of education as a mechanism for the intergenerational maintenance of community norms:

> …we need teachers capable of passing on the knowledge of how society works and the values it wishes to instil in every person.

A more common response was to suggest that the route to maintaining a healthy society was through the development of individual potentials:

> …helping individuals to grow, develop and reach their potential to eventually become a contributing member of a changing world.

Moreover as indicated in Figure 4, individual fulfilment tended to be understood in terms much wider than those promoted by the more puristic forms of economic liberalism, where the good person is the rational calculating market actor, and the just society one organised around market ideals of free exchange, efficiency and productivity. Thus while a few did subscribe to this more limited view:

> To be successful or to get ahead in today's world you have to have money. The more money you have the more successful you are seen to be. A high level of education will give you a better chance of gaining a high paying job….the needs of society can at times totally eclipse individual aims leaving an individuals life goals unfulfilled.

> a far larger number tended to write in the language of self-actualisation;

> ….education is about liberating people so they can reach the potential of their choice….Schools should also educate a social conscience in their students which will inspire them to take on crucial jobs later on in life.
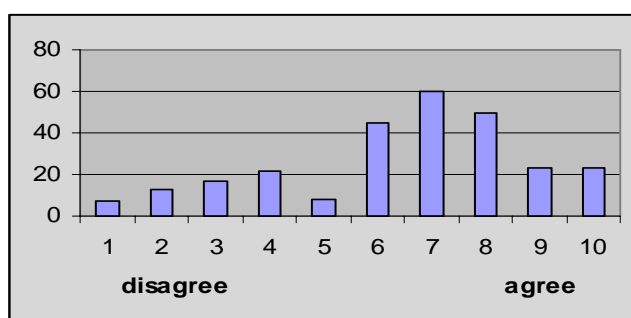

Figure 4:   The enforcement of rules such as the wearing of uniform, showing respect for the teacher, is essential in education

Here we find a repetition of the idea that if we provide conditions conducive to the development and fulfilment of individual potential then the prosperous economy, as with the good society, will take care of itself.

> ….people fulfilling their potential is the most important. I believe that everybody has gifts and talents for different things and that helping people discover their potential is vital. In saying that for economy to go around we need to maintain the workforce, but I believe that if everyone fulfils their potential with education there will in turn be a maintained workforce.

A few were able to take this further, including under 'the development of individual potentials':

> …preparing them to face an ever-changing world, and to develop in them the attributes to be a discerning individual that is able to critically analyse the global environment of which they are a part.

Order, norms and values

We can take these observations further and press more explicitly towards some of the social justice issues noted above through looking at subjects' responses to propositions concerning the importance of school rules, the grounds for these, patriotism and citizenship. These responses are summarised in Figures 5, 6, and 7.
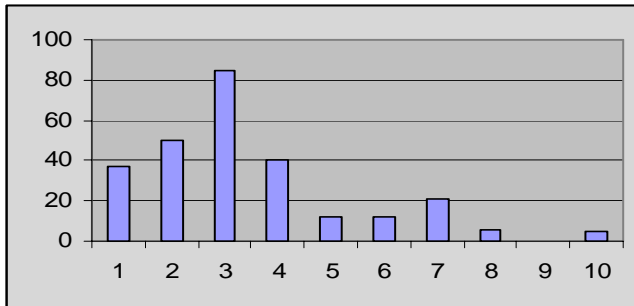
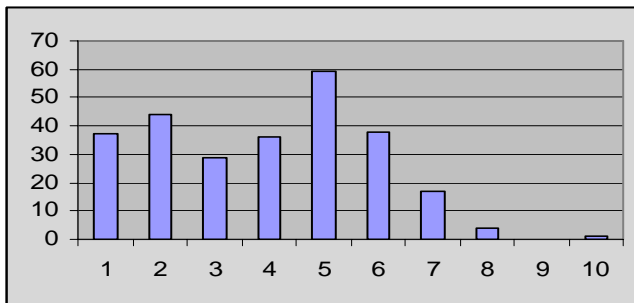**Figure 5: School rules are arbitrary conventions that have no moral value**

Figure 6: Patriotism is good. But no politics
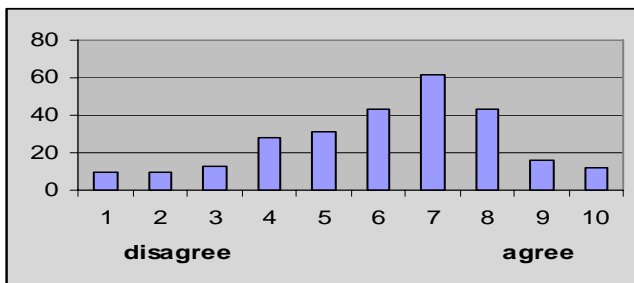
**Figure 7:   We should be forming a society of citizens committed to
                     higher values than themselves**

These data can be narratively summarised in the following simple points.

Rules and their enforcement are crucial ingredients in effective schooling.

These rules ought to be rooted in some core principles, involve something more than just order for the sake of order.

The core principles seen to be at stake here bear little resemblance to those popularly associated with the figure of the patriot, one who prizes most highly the unchanging survival of a particular cultural form of life.

The core principles seen to be at stake here do have something to do with the figure of the citizen, the member of a culturally diverse public-political community willing and capable of participating in deliberation over and decision about how best to organise collective living arrangements.

What support for this interpretation can be found within the journals? Here we looked at responses to questions about the cultural dimensions of education and the importance of a cultural

understanding for teaching practice, as well as those asking respondents to consider what constitutes the so-called 'good' (in the sense of well-behaved, mature) student. The type of narrative sequence that can be read from these responses both complements that just outlined and moves it forward in several interesting ways.

First we find recognition that order is a necessary or at least unavoidable fact of socio-cultural life, that schools are no exception and that growing up in and into society, a function schools are tasked with overseeing, involves in large part an acceptance of the need for rules.

> Education is a way of passing on information and our way of life onto others…the transfer of culture from one person to another…which results in them becoming culturally the same as you……Information needs to be passed down the generations in order to maintain and continue to develop a functional world.

> A culture is defined by the behaviours that are acceptable within a particular society.

> I don't think good kids are necessarily more mature, just more aware of the behaviour desired of them.

This is often followed closely by an observation that the task of presenting oneself as 'good' from the perspective of the prevailing order is far easier for some than for others, and that this depends in large part on the degree of fit between the culture of the school and the student's own cultural background.

> Obeying rules gets more important to you if they are your rules.

> Even though we are said to be a multicultural society, I think that if you are white things come to you a lot easier. People tend to see a person of another race as a troublemaker.

Around this point, however our narrative breaks in two different directions. One develops this account of differences in cultural fit in terms of a deficit view of the cultural background of the maladjusted or difficult student. What is not considered here is the possibility that schools, and the wider social order within which they are embedded and represent, might be unresponsive to cultural and other differences in life-situations, or that the attribution of dysfunctional qualities to difference might itself be symptomatic of a tendency to take the dominant culture as a sort of Archimedean point against which all departures are viewed, by degrees, as somehow pathological.

> Good kids fit into the establishment more easily than naughty or disruptive kids as they are different culturally. Good kids have support at home, their parents talk to them on how to behave and understand the rules of the school and the playground…..The disruptive and naughty kid comes from a home with little support or knowledge of the schooling process, their parents would have had a bad experience at school as well as resulting in the child having difficulty understanding the establishment and how to interact with teachers and students.

A second strand did attempt to place the problem of difference in cultural fit, and hence of experiences and outcomes of schooling, in the light of an historical cultural unresponsiveness and inflexibility on the part of teachers, schools and education systems.

> Australia's education was originally taught through the eyes of the white Australian. However recently as minorities have become increasingly recognised and their history which was overlooked is now being placed into many of the schools' curriculum.

> …the cultural factor in Australian education….has long been based predominantly on 'white' western Christian middle class values. Thus mainstream education in Australia may benefit some students more than others based on cultural values.

What is interesting here, and especially so in view of the following section, is the way these cultural differences are couched in a language wherein culture and the ideas of race and ethnicity are seldom out of each other's sight. Without delving into the mass of scholarship that gather around observations such as these we might surmise that cultural differences that make a difference may be more readily drawn and grasped when appended to ideas of race and ethnicity, those where the lines of division between 'our kind of people' and 'the others' may be represented in a tangible form; skin deep may be made to mean very deep. Other divisions that are routine features of scholarly accounts of social inequality, privilege and disadvantage and so forth, those for instance taking in the categories of class and gender, would seem (though see below) to belong to the past having been put out of business by the corrective workings of equal opportunity law and policy (even if, as the 'what about the boys' debate indicates, this may be seen in some quarters as an overcorrection). These are, of course, divisions that occur within the parameters of 'our kind of people', where there may be a strong temptation to view, given 'we' are seen to inhabit the same socio-cultural worlds, success or failure on individual terms.

Equality, sameness and difference, responsibility and public goods

Under this head we bring together materials that relate directly to specific concerns in the area of social justice and education, equality and inequality, sameness and difference, and those that explore perceptions of the extent and limits of (individual and collective) responsibility as indicated in support or otherwise for education as a public good along with the grounds for this.

Figure 8 suggests that for our cohort (and we need to bear in mind that they are prospective teachers) there is a solid base of support for a well resourced and universally available education system.
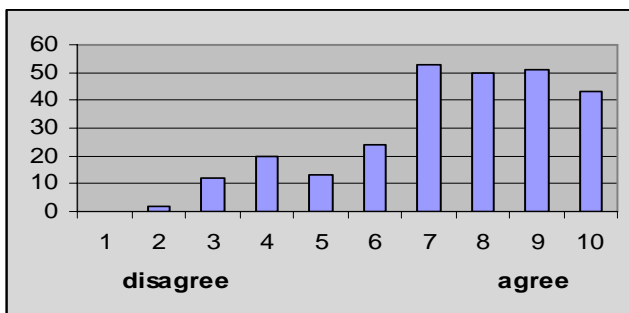

Figure 8: **The state should be responsible for the provision of education to all kids (and university students too). But not a minimum education. A maximum education. No private schools. All public schools, but terrific schools**

At the same time (see Figure 9) universal is not intended to mean uniform. There is also considerable support for the proposition that this education should be responsive to differences. Difference here is construed in terms consistent with a child-centred approach; that is in terms of individual potentials, needs and desires. We will look at other dimensions of difference below.
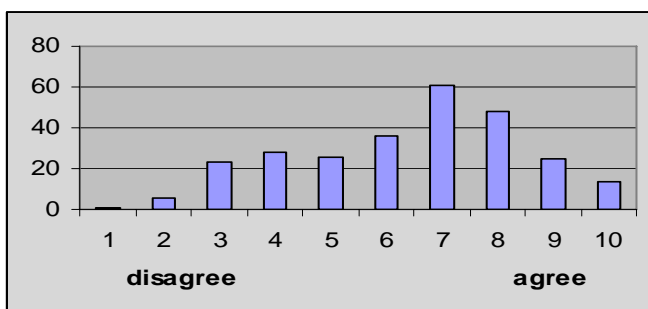

Figure 9: **It is the State's duty to allow for the identification of each child's potential and the provision of appropriate education**

Moreover this support would seem to be for education as a public good, one that serves all, not just those who have paid, or paid the most, for it. As Figure 10 indicates there seems to be little confidence in letting the marketplace determine the type of education system that should obtain.
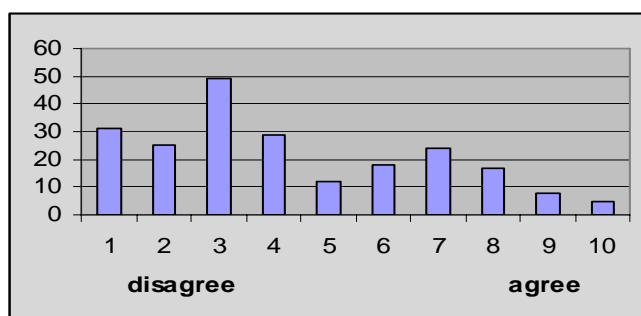

Figure 10: The State should provide for the same basic education for all, and if the family wants anything extra they can arrange for it and pay for it

Turning once more to the journal reflections we can elaborate further on these views. Here we have placed respondents' observations under sub-headings to assist in drawing out specific themes.

Class inequalities

When pressed our respondents found little difficulty acknowledging the possibility that the existing distribution of material and cultural resources along with power can work to ease or retard the passage of students through schooling. We need to be mindful here that this may be as much an artefact of their having been exposed to the idea of class as a part of their program of studies (as evidenced in the use of terms such as 'cultural capital') as it is a reflection of the schemes they routinely use to organise their perceptions and experiences of the world. Beyond a rather loose and vague reference to the 'middle class' or, less so, 'working class when asked to identify in such terms, there is little across the body of journal reflections to suggest that class occupies an important place in their systems of identification.

For many it is the distinction between public and private schools that best allows them to grasp and describe the relation between class inequalities and schooling.

> Schools are separated into three categories…public schools, catholic schools and independent…..Most families on low income or multiple children have very limited choice about what schools they can send their children to…..Even between public schools, which are supposed to be equal as they are run by the same government, they are divided. This division is done by the suburbs they are situated in, how much the parents earn that send their children there…..Some also present their schools to be imposing to newcomers and give the opinion they are exclusive.

Others noted the effects of low family incomes on the ability to meet the financial demands of schooling while a few pursued this further into a discussion of cultural capital.

> I have seen school teachers set work that is impossible for disadvantaged and low income families to complete. Not all students have access to the internet at home so it would be inappropriate to set homework that requires that type of research. ….Monetary requirements in a school outside of traditional school fees are also out of reach for some students.

Meritocratic and deficit views

This willingness to grapple with the idea of class needs, however, to be balanced against a strong meritocratic bias within respondents' accounts of the determinants of educational outcomes. When asked what they considered to be the main factors influencing success or failure at school

most nominated hard work and talent, quite often with a glance in the direction of social circumstances though seeing these as being readily able to be offset through a bit of extra effort.

> ..a student's educational achievement is most likely affected by hard work and individual talent. All students start off with the same potential and with hard work and individual talent, students need to use both (to get) excellent results….However…a student's circumstances within a community may mean that they may not have all the same opportunities as others. Despite this many students, in the past, have risen above the social standing to achieve top results.

On those occasions where a student's social circumstances were accorded a higher priority we found a recurrence of tendencies mentioned earlier; a deficit (individual or family) view of disadvantage and the treatment of cultural disparities between home and school in keeping with an ethnic or race conception of culture.

> Social circumstances may govern the way a student learns but it is not the sole factor of achievement or failure. A student with a hard background may have other things to consider…. (eg looking after siblings while parents work)…. before learning… (so that)…. schooling becomes a lower priority. On the other hand a student from a middle class or upper class family has more resources and opportunities to study and therefore achieve….Those of lower class or different backgrounds may decide to work hard and achieve in school so they can create more opportunities for themselves and their families.

> …to achieve a high standard of work you need to push yourself and work hard. In saying that though many people are disadvantaged by their social circumstances and by this I mostly mean their parents, upbringing and life at home. Children may be from a wealthy background of highly educated parents who have pushed them to do well and taught them and helped them with their schooling…On the other hand children may come from a non-English speaking background, which already disadvantages them, or they may have parents that don't have much of an education and so haven't been pushed and helped with any education.

What is noticeably absent across nearly all responses to this question is any consideration of the possibility that socio-cultural advantages and disadvantages might be systematically related through the way society organises the production and distribution of material and symbolic goods. Once again this should not surprise. As already observed most students identified, when pressed, as middle class and saw their educational experiences enhanced by attending schools where the majority of their associates (staff as well as students) shared roughly the same circumstances and outlook as themselves. If ones primary reference group is made up of people just like you then it is not difficult to arrive at the conclusion that it is effort and native talent that separates the successes from the failures.

Positive discrimination

Many respondents did nevertheless support some form of positive discrimination, though once again this support tended to be referenced against an idea of cultural difference as ethnic or racial differences.

> I can't see a good reason not to. Scholarships are generally given on merit, and for people from disadvantaged groups lacking financial resources can make all the difference. It's hard to stay afloat in someone else's culture, and it's hard to keep up when you're starting from behind.

Some took the view that if disadvantages had a significant cultural component then something more than just monetary assistance was required.

> I believe disadvantaged groups should receive assistance to give them greater opportunities to gain education. However scholarships are of no use if teaching practices and pedagogies do not meet their specific needs culturally, academically and socially.

Among the more interesting responses here took what is effectively a conservative position towards equality, namely equality as identical treatment.

> No more than any other citizen is entitled to. A balance needs to be maintained as some groups that society considers disadvantaged may be very offended if it was suggested that they were unable to cope and given handouts.

This is interesting in that by raising the issue of potential stigmatisation it opens out to a central issue confronting those working in the field of social justice within an individualised culture; that is, the way the term dependency, having been progressively denuded of any positive or even neutral connotations it might once have held, being now understood in entirely negative terms (welfare beneficiaries, drug addicts or co-dependent partners all being seen as suffering from character defects).

Welfare or work

The final set of reflections in this study respond to the proposition, "Those who are able to work and refuse the opportunity should not expect society's support". This proposition quite brutally pushes tolerance for difference and an awareness of the high costs of staying different, collective as against individual responsibility, and even a commitment to individual fulfilment to their limits. In the majority of responses these limits were unequivocally declared.

> I think that people who choose not to work and who are able to should not expect society's support….I don't think you can use cultural background as an excuse for not working if you are living in Australia.

> If there is a job there and they need a job, as unfortunate as the situation may be they should take it. For who is to say that if they take that job and work hard they may be able to rise up through the ranks ..to a position they are more comfortable with.

> If too many people…start to refuse work our societies structure may not be able to hold.

Yet a small, but significant number opposed the proposition. For some it was a matter of striking a balance between competing values.

> I was raised to believe that you need to earn things in life, not just expect it …On the other hand I was brought up with the value that we need to help others as well…those who need it.

Others, often drawing anecdotally on their own experiences or those of familiar others, criticised the proposition for being too harsh and allowing stereotypes to eclipse empathy.

> I have heard stories from already working mothers being told to work more, to pregnant women being told to look for work right up until the baby drops.

> ….people seem to have a particular stereotype in mind…uneducated or poorly, no culture etc. This is not always the case…consider this case: a migrant, 50 years of age, OK English ability but not perfectly fluent…His job in his country of origin was a prestigious one, which relied on his university professor-level education, his superb talent in his native language….and his network of friends, peers and connections. In Australia, the only work that is guaranteed to him is a factory job, which pays less than the equivalent of his welfare benefits.

Perhaps the most compelling negative response worked between the lines of a commitment to fulfilling individual potential and the wellbeing of society as a whole.

> …putting a person in an underpaid, overworked, uninteresting job will not do much for society. Their self-esteem would suffer as well as mental health and confidence. A dissatisfied, apathetic dysfunctional workforce does not seem appealing…..The use of safety nets as in unemployment benefits is crucial not just to the health of the non-working person, but a safety net for society itself…For a person refusing to work may be lazy and should not expect support, but the inability to survive in society without resorting to crime is apparent. The costs to society in mental healthcare, increased crime rates, and flow down effects onto children are insurmountable.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have described some of the ways that students conceive teaching and education and its place in Australian society. This has presented, at least implicitly, a particular set of dispositions to social justice.

In this article we have drawn upon journal responses, and Likert scale propositions to questions about teaching and broader social life from a large compulsory first year pre-service teacher topic. We have argued that a particular kind of (nice) liberalism is the dominant ideological form for this cohort, even as the students express different variations and contradictions within the broad ideology of liberalism. The ideas they express and the ways they position themselves nevertheless reflect the individualistic commitments of classical and contemporary liberalism.

A key point of focus in considering these journal responses was the way in which the students negotiated the tension between society and the individual. The journal responses help illuminate the way in which liberal ideology struggles to reach an adequate understanding of this dynamic and of the social more generally. The effect of this is to decontextualise social issues, by locating the individual as the agent of action within highly impoverished conceptions of 'the social'.

This is particularly evident through the way that the students think of equality. Equality is also hamstrung by its conception of sameness and difference. Students recognise that different students have different needs, but express the view that this difference should be managed by striving to treat each student the same. This is an instrumentalist notion of equality which is supported by the broader liberal ideals of personal responsibility, possessive individualism and the split between individual and society.

In this article we were interested in enhancing our understanding of prospective teachers' perspectives of teaching in order to enhance our own teaching. We have come to understand that the tensions between various dialectical concepts central to teaching, social justice and Western culture have a limiting effect upon the pre-service teacher's capacity to manage diversity and contradiction. This is effected by an overriding concern with the individual, an impoverished notion of the social dictated by a logic of thinking and being that is highly instrumentalist, as opposed to relational. The aims of challenging this ideological form involve developing more sophisticated notions of the social, the relationship between the individual and society, the development of reflexive practices and the exposure to relational ways of thinking about teaching, the social and social justice.

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