



CAPABILITIES APPROACH AND BOURDIEUIAN NOTIONS OF PEDAGOGY

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Abstract:

This project aims to explore how pedagogic capacity of teachers can be enhanced to address the issue of student underachievement including strategies beyond the classroom. The project will focus on classroom based teacher effectiveness research and inquiry, and its relevance to the development of public education policy: an Australian context. The research will identify distinctive features of teacher capability to generate a framework of teacher capabilities in the key curriculum areas of Literacy/Humanities, Numeracy/Mathematics and Science. Teachers will be asked to identify the extent of their exposure to and application of capability. The analysis will also identify central themes in participants' descriptions of pedagogy to understand practitioner conceptions of teaching practice in standards-based curriculum contexts. This involves identifying and marking out precise teacher capabilities, as alternatives to current reified 'multivariate analyses'. The study also examines how and where schools and systems can take their planning and preparation beyond current standardized teacher effectiveness approaches towards specific capability-based opportunities for teaching practice to advance individual student learning.

Keywords: *capabilities approach, bourdieuian pedagogy, literacy, numeracy, science.*

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, as identified by a number of international and national reports, a persistent and marked disparity between the highest and lowest performing students has been identified (Sustainable Australia Report 2013; OECD 2013; PISA 2020). Successive policy reforms have failed to stem the decline (Better Schools 2012). Contemporary teacher effectiveness expressions (Hattie 2009; 2012), assume cause-effect dependence between teaching practice(s) and learning (achievement) irrespective of student background. This relationship between effective teaching and learning rests on standardized curriculum and assessment benchmarks which are questionable with regards to explaining ongoing disparity between students regardless of how effective teachers are particularly in schools in disadvantaged regions. In particular, research evidence indicates how a focus on limited notions of achievement restricts teaching practice(s) in ways counterproductive to enhancing student learning (Macneil, Prater and Busch, 2009).

This project aims to transcend the restrictive accounts of teacher effectiveness studies changing how we think about teaching and learning by emphasizing how the pedagogic capacity of teachers can be enhanced to address the issue of student underachievement including strategies beyond the classroom (Better Schools 2012; Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann & Cooper 2014). Specifically, it will address student underachievement within core disciplines (Literacy/Humanities, Numeracy/Mathematics, Science) by delineating teacher capabilities. Teachers need a comprehensive awareness

and knowledge of the social justice and ethical conditions of their pedagogic practice(s) and their links to student achievement. The project will reveal how a capabilities-informed pedagogy broadens understandings about student learning and achievement by generating new knowledge among teachers about (1) what aspects of pedagogy matters for developing capabilities and teacher capacity (2) how well teachers understand disciplinary content knowledge in order to bridge differences in student learning (3) what specific teacher related pedagogic capacities are needed to transform and sustain pedagogic work beyond contemporary standardized minimums and (4) what schools and systems can do to support this capability approach to pedagogic practice.

The emphasis in the project will be on understanding relationships between subject content knowledge in schools (i.e. 'opportunity to learn') and student achievement acknowledging that all students can learn and have the opportunity to succeed. Student needs are diverse and opportunities for learning vary. There is significant literature with regard to how building student resilience and agency through a sense of achievement in a diverse range of educational activities is important (Ungar, 2008). Aligning teacher-student relations so that teaching and schooling makes significant differences to achievement merits understanding(s) of pedagogy beyond standardized midpoints (Skourdoumbis, 2014). This project focuses on teacher practice rather than standardized outcomes. Context matters when it comes to curriculum, pedagogy and student learning (see Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett, 1982; Thrupp, 1999). Concentrating on the ways teachers teach their students effectively within a specific context, and the different ways teaching and learning occurs, the project potentially changes how we conceive engagement in schools, (i.e. situated learning).

The research is informed by two theoretical concepts: 1) capabilities as typified in the capabilities approach of Sen (2009) and Nussbaum (2011) and 2) pedagogic work (Bourdieu & Passeron 2000). The capabilities research literature focuses on the set of opportunities and freedoms enabling what one is 'able to do and to be' (Nussbaum 2011: 20) through a respect for the self-definition bestowed by the choices made and valued by motivated and engaged individuals to lead a flourishing life based on core capabilities: bodily health, bodily integrity, sense, imagination, and thought, and practical reason. Pedagogic work represents the reproducible effects of schooling. Specific principles of curriculum and assessment are given expression by teachers through their teaching. Identifying enabling and capability-informed teaching practices through pedagogic work guides learning beyond mandated national curriculum and assessment targets. This project links a national curriculum comprising generic capabilities and disciplinary-focused pedagogic work that engages all although with profound implications for the socially excluded re-directing learning experiences towards individual self-development.

The project is both significant and innovative. It is significant because policy efforts generally centre on limited and standardized measures of 'quality teaching' as a set of skills rather than addressing the capacity of teachers to make a difference to the achievement of students through holistic teaching practices. There is now widespread recognition internationally and as stated in the Melbourne Declaration (2008) that students require a range of generic capacities to negotiate complex and unstructured, volatile and fast moving globalised lives. One focus of this project is to develop ways of thinking about teaching practice(s) as a set of capabilities which will be developed in their students. Building teacher capabilities will both enhance their own understanding(s) of what it is to be agentic and how that may be relayed to their students. Teachers themselves are often very unevenly prepared (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005) so attending to evident educational inequality by developing teacher capacity as a component of pedagogic work broadens the scholastic options of their students. The project would inform the field of teacher education by establishing and connecting teacher capabilities to the development of student capabilities.

The research is innovative in bringing together theoretical accounts of capabilities (Sen 2009; Nussbaum 2011) and pedagogic work (Bourdieu & Passeron 2000) to fortify

what matters most in confronting underachievement, bolstering the pedagogic capacity of teachers. Pedagogic mastery to enhance student achievement demands a richer set of learning opportunities than those currently on offer. This involves improving teacher capacity by connecting learning experiences across disciplines.

The project contributes specifically to societal challenge number two, *Promoting population health and well-being* and directly addresses a national research priority, *maximising social and economic participation in society* particularly in relation to *key life stages, intergenerational disparities and socioeconomic disadvantage*. It will better target specific areas of concern involving student learning needs. A good education is critical to the future prosperity and productivity of young Australians and the nation as a whole, and represents an identifiable Australian Government priority. The research will embed a capability approach to learning as a vital component of pedagogic work.

Teacher practice improves if teachers actively engage in investigating problems of under-achievement to produce local and specific solutions (Stenhouse 1975; BERA, 2020) with an emphasis on engaging more of the most vulnerable students. This research will use core themes of a capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2011) currently missing from ‘quality teaching’ pedagogies to include broader conceptions of student functioning/achievement, for instance, ‘being able to imagine, to think, and to reason’ and to ‘engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s own life’ (Nussbaum 1992: 222). This is important as restrictive teacher quality and effectiveness pedagogies (Skourdombis & Gale 2013) do not adequately serve the interests of students. The research will provide the field of teacher practice with knowledge of capabilities to inform teaching practice, including producing a pedagogic map of *capabilities*. In identifying the pedagogic nature of teacher capabilities, the project addresses engagement and how pedagogical relationships with teachers can do that work.

The research will further broaden current conceptions of pedagogic work (Bourdieu & Passeron 2000) by advancing issues around inequality beyond narrow school and teacher effectiveness interpretations (Gorard 2010; Thrupp and Lupton 2006; Baker, Barton, Darling-Hammond, Haertel, Ladd, Linn, Ravitch, Rothstein, Shavelson, & Shepard 2010) so that new understandings about the concept’s service to teacher practice and student achievement are generated. This will involve connecting aspects of the capabilities approach with Bourdieuan notions of pedagogic work to develop in teachers the capacity for deep and disciplined thinking about the academic complexities of their work and its connections to learning. It will also necessitate theorizing teaching and learning to identify the pedagogical refinements needed to target students in need.

In combining a capabilities approach with pedagogic work student learning and understanding can be mapped beyond skill-based analyses. The research is particularly sensitive to context, something that quality teaching and most metricated teacher effectiveness approaches discount (Thrupp & Lupton 2006). Primarily, this research recognizes that to improve the achievement and capability of all necessitates strategies of intervention that professionally engages the capacities of teachers. By identifying and marking out precise teacher capabilities, as alternatives to current reified ‘multi-variate analyses’, the research promotes human autonomy. This new account of the ‘pedagogic relation’ (Bourdieu & Passeron 2000: 95) has potential to express complexities of student learning from within self-defining personal abilities and characteristics.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research approach is informed by a Bourdieuan theoretical framework. The adopted framework will analyze teaching practice to identify inter-connected and associative contextual influences that on first inspection remain concealed or unobtrusive, yet remain central to and impinge upon practice and act on the outcome(s)

attained. Empiricist interpretations of social and academic characteristics conjoined with combined capabilities (Nussbaum 2011) connects freedoms and opportunities along with personal abilities/attributes, an important feature of the capability approach where human freedom, agency and empowerment are respected.

The project will use a case study design (Yin 2009). It will investigate the case of pedagogic capabilities from the perspective of classroom based teachers constructing knowledge of causal links between teaching practice and student learning outcomes. The derivation of a sociology of teacher capability as part of a general theory of pedagogic work entails connecting learning outcomes and broader macro-structural forces such as class relations.

The research will generate data through teacher interviews by describing and understanding pedagogic work insofar that it transforms learning. A non-probability sampling method will be used as the research is relatively small-scale and adopts a case study qualitative design (see Somekh & Lewin, 2011). Up to 60 in-depth interviews of up to one hour will be conducted with public secondary school teachers from within the State of Victoria. Teachers from across level (7-12) will be selected from the following three teaching/learning area categories (cases): Literacy (English/Humanities); Numeracy (Mathematics), Science. Each teaching/learning area represents a case; i.e. 3 cases in all, 20 teachers in each case. Participants will be selected purposefully for their expertise and positions in relation to issues in question (see below). Up to 60 public secondary schools from within metropolitan Melbourne and country Victoria will be selected. 30 schools will be selected from those with a record of high student achievement, as indicated on the MySchool website. The remaining 30 schools will be selected from schools with a record of low student achievement. Access to teachers will be via the Principal in the first instance. Teacher professional/subject organizations will also be contacted to assist in recruitment of teachers.

Discourse Analysis (DA) forms the data analysis component of the study. The work is motivated to understand the theoretical outlines of *teacher capabilities* and so it identifies how teachers work with and operationalize characteristic interpretations of 'capabilities' to inform their teaching. The analysis will also identify central themes in participants' descriptions of pedagogy to understand practitioner conceptions of teaching practice in standards-based curriculum contexts. The DA will help elicit (1) a sociology of teacher capability, and (2) the prevailing patterns in three areas of pedagogical practice. These are: 1) The stated connections between teachers and their discipline(s), 2) The extent to which teachers discuss aspects of their pedagogy with their students and colleagues more broadly to modify their practice and, 3) The extent to which teachers transcend their own conception(s) of pedagogy beyond the customary.

Once common (including diverging) and emerging meanings are charted, findings will be presented as narrative accounts under key themes constructed as headings. It is envisaged that key outcomes will include: 1) An outline of the extent to which individual teachers plan for and teach based on a capability informed pedagogy in specific disciplines, and 2) How and where teachers can take their planning and preparation beyond current standardized teacher effectiveness approaches towards specific capability-based opportunities of teaching practice to advance individual student learning.

The dissemination strategy for the project incorporates aspects of Southwell, Gannaways, Orrell, Chalmers and Abraham's (2010) study into effective dissemination of the outcomes of teaching and learning projects; *clear goals* and a *climate of readiness for change*. A summary of research findings will be distributed to all participants in the study conveying specific innovations. I will produce: (1) three peer-reviewed journal publications for submission to *Discourse; Australian Educational Researcher* and *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*; (2) two international conference papers for

presentation at ECER and BERA; (3) one national conference paper for presentation at AARE and (4) a written report based on the project's findings and implications for national education policy and teacher education. A copy of project findings will also be made available to the Victorian DEECD.

The research environment at Deakin University is strong and world class. I will have access to a number of internationally respected scholars in the field of education, one of which is already acting as my mentor for this project. Deakin's Strategic Research Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation (CREFI), has international links with reputed international scholars. CREFI is well-equipped to act as a communications forum for the research. A website connected to CREFI will be established to document and circulate materials produced through the research including formal publications. The research is strongly aligned with the core commitments of CREFI, namely its commitments to equity and social justice and to transforming educational pedagogies and environments through strategic and innovative research. The work of CREFI is also supported by a strong executive committee, and secretariat.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Feasibility and Benefit

The distinctive benefits of the project are threefold. First, it recognizes that in a pluralist, democratic and cosmopolitan society geared for the complexities of the twenty first century, education is a principal public good, the effect(s) of which are felt far into the future. Second, in parsing *capabilities* and learning, it acknowledges that teaching practice is an activity with its own unique and contiguous features answerable to the family of practices that define it. Third, the project prioritizes the achievement of students nourishing their potential through the learning experiences that intrinsically motivates them.

Project Plan and Timeline

<p>Stage 1 (Months 1-6)</p> <p>This stage involves a meta-analysis of research literature describing teacher capability in the nominated disciplines. A research assistant (RA) skilled in document analysis and survey design will be engaged within the first three months of the study to conduct a literature review of capabilities in teaching and learning. The analysis will spot specialized properties that relate to each discipline and teacher capability. Particular attention will be afforded research literature that categorically nominates exacting teacher capabilities and curriculum relevant knowledge in the chosen disciplines. In identifying this aspect, the research will build a provisional summary of curriculum (subject-content) relevant teacher capabilities that act as guiding templates for the second stage of the project.</p>
<p>Stage 2 (Months 7-18)</p> <p>Stage 2 will involve development and dissemination of (1) a State-wide survey of public secondary schools where participant teachers as the targeted population will be asked to identify the extent of their exposure to and application of capability and (2) preparation of ethics applications for the survey and subsequent expected teacher interviews. A representative (non-probability) sample of 60 public secondary schools in the State of Victoria will be vetted for their student achievement. 30 'above expected level of performance' and 30 'below expected level of performance' schools will be selected. Selection is based on the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Research Authority (ACARA) Index of Community and Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA). An on-line survey will be sent to selected schools and used to collect data on classroom</p>

<p>based capability approaches to pedagogy. The survey will be emailed to school Principals in the first instance and follow-up telephone calls made. The Principal will be contacted by one of the researchers requesting teacher interest—interview volunteers—from within the following subject categories and across year levels: Literacy (English/Humanities); Numeracy (Mathematics), Science. The researcher will request that the Principal raise the matter of the project with teachers at a relevant staff meeting. No coercion is intended and this will be made explicitly clear. The survey data will then be used to develop characteristics of teacher capabilities identified in <i>Stage 1</i>.</p>
<p>Stage 3 (Months 18-24)</p>
<p>This involves carrying out teacher interviews. The selection of teachers will be based on the characteristics identified in the meta-analysis of research literature and State survey. Interviews will in most instances be face-to-face.</p>
<p>Stage 4 (Months 24-30)</p>
<p>This involves the data analysis component. Each case study of teacher capabilities from within specified disciplines will be analyzed. Capability orientations to pedagogic work that contribute to student achievement will be based on evidence provided in <i>Stages 2</i> and <i>3</i>. Case studies will be selected to reflect distinctive <i>teaching practices</i>.</p>
<p>Stage 5 (Months 31-36)</p>
<p>This is the synthesis and communication of the analysis conducted in <i>Stages 2</i> to <i>4</i>. It will identify distinctive features of pedagogic work to generate a <i>framework of teacher capability</i> in the key curriculum areas of Literacy/Humanities, Numeracy/Mathematics and Science.</p>

CONCLUSION

De-identified data will be stored at Deakin University and held in a locked filing cabinet in the office of Dr. Andrew Skourdombis and destroyed after five years. Contact details for the participants will at all times be kept separately from the de-identified data. While the de-identified data will be kept for a period of five years after the completion of the project, the contact details for the respondents will be destroyed when the project is complete.

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