

# **Critical Perspectives On Educational Partnerships In The Era Of Neoliberalism**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the possibilities for educational partnerships for social justice in a context of neoliberal hegemony. Through a critical pedagogy framework it considers the ever-narrowing view of education under the dominant political discourse of Neoliberalism as a matter of ‘market advantage’, and provides an overview of the challenges facing educational partnerships in a climate where the primary aim of education is to bolster market position and facilitate the commercialisation of learning and knowledge.

Roundtable dialogues between parents, community members, teachers and academics, and e-interviews with education activists provide alternative perspectives and pose a number of questions and challenges for those wishing to consider how collaboration through and for education might contribute to breaking this neoliberal consensus.

Responding to Apple’s list of tasks for the critical activist educator, and drawing on Paulo Freire's view of pedagogy as social change practice this thesis explores the challenges, possibilities, aspirations and actuality of alternative perspectives on educational partnerships, and argues for the need to develop coherent frameworks based on solidarity, struggle and hope, where public good rather than the market provides the compass for educational objectives and strategies, including partnerships.

## **Declaration**

“I, Joanne Williams, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘Developing a critical model of educational partnerships in an era of neoliberal crisis’ is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.”

**Signature**

**Date**

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## List of Publications and Awards

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## Glossary of Terms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AEU	Australian Education Union
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
BER	Building the Education Revolution
CRT	Casual Relief Teacher
Go8	Group of Eight (8)
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
NAPLAN	The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy
NR	Neighbourhood Renewal
NTEU	National Tertiary Education Union
PENA	Popular Education Network Australia
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
RNLs	Regional Network Leaders
RTOs	Registered Training Organisations
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TIMMS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UBV	Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela (Bolivarian University of Venezuela)
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
UTEP	University of Texas (El Paso)
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VELS	Victorian Essential Learning Standards
VU	Victoria University

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and scene setting

### Overview and background

What excellence is this, that manages to “coexist with more than a billion inhabitants of the developing world who live in poverty,” not to say misery? Not to mention the all but indifference with which it coexists with “pockets of poverty” and misery in its own, developed body. What excellence is this, that sleeps in peace while numberless men and women make their home in the street, and says it is their own fault that they are on the street? What excellence is this, that struggles so little, if it struggles at all, with discrimination for reason of sex, class, or race, as if to reject someone different, humiliate her, offend him, hold her in contempt, exploit her... What excellence is this, that tepidly registers the millions of children who come into the world and do not remain, or not for long, or if they are more resistant, manage to stay a while, then take their leave of the world? (Paulo Freire, 1994, p. 94)

As a teacher, now teacher-educator, and of course as a human being, I am fundamentally concerned with the question of what we might do, in and through education, to advance the struggle for a more socially just world. The everyday horrors of ‘living normal’ - poor and marginalised - as over 5 billion people across the globe do, might not always register in our teaching but they should. This is particularly so when in many cases those suffering the brunt of these social crimes are children. As noted by the Uruguayan poet Eduardo Galeano, very few of them are immune.

Day after day, children are denied the right to be children. The world treats rich kids as if they were money, teaching them to act the way money acts. The world treats poor kids as if they were garbage, to turn them into garbage. And those in the middle, neither rich nor poor, are chained to televisions and trained to live the life of prisoners. The few children who manage to be children must have a lot of magic and a lot of luck (Galeano, 2000, p. 11).

In a global context of deepening poverty and misery, the world becoming increasingly and savagely unequal and unjust, education is still considered to be, or at least, still presented as, a key lever for social progress and individual social mobility. Policy-makers consistently link education to wealth generation and wellbeing. International frameworks such as UNESCO’s (2006) Education for All and national government agendas (Australian Government, 2009; Gonski (Chair) et al., 2011) both consider

education as the key to ‘inclusion’ and for preserving what might be possible of a neoliberal consensus.

Since their earliest existence, the function or role of universities in broader society, that is, the question of what it is that a university should do and be, has generated much debate. From the early academy to the massification of higher education, these debates have reflected different socio-economic interests and culture wars. In the contemporary global context outlined, a generalised policy call for universities to be better *engaged* with their communities has led to a growing interest in and discussion around university-community initiatives, particularly focused on issues of ‘access’ and ‘equity’. At the same time, an erosion of public funds for schooling and attention on the growing demands placed on schools in attempting to redress social inequality has prompted calls for schools to ‘partner’ and ‘network’ with a range of organisations and institutions under the guise of providing greater opportunities and support to overcome barriers to educational exclusion and failure. This thesis asks can partnerships provide a vehicle through which to respond to the dire global context described, and if so, in what ways might this be possible? It considers the possibilities for such engagement and educational partnering for social justice in a context the neoliberal hegemony of ‘partnership policy’.

## **Global context**

The need for education that makes a difference is clear. We live in a global socio-economic order where more than 3 billion people, almost half the world, live on less than \$2.50 a day (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008). Worse still the global economic crisis, rather than being a leveller, has given further impetus to wealth concentration and disparity (Treanor, 2011). The latest UN report (United Nations, 2012) suggests that very few of UNESCOs Millennium Development Goals are on target, and the seemingly modest call for all children to attend and complete primary school, remains unlikely to be achieved by 2015 (this is also leaving aside the substantive question of their actual learning, beyond attendance). The report also emphasises the importance being placed on the 8<sup>th</sup> Millennium Development Goal, the “global partnership for development” which suggests that despite a real-term drop in

international aid from wealthy countries, and without clear dates and accountability mechanisms, somehow the global community will work together to create new trade systems and cooperative measures to alleviate global poverty.

In reality, ongoing and in many cases worsening inequality in developed countries must be considered in the context of the dramatically deepening gap between the industrially advanced countries of the planet and the poorest continents. The world's poor continue to be excluded from the most basic educational outcomes, negating the prospects of merit based social mobility and continuing to reproduce decades of educationally-fostered inequality and oppression. The education systems of most wealthy, developed nations continue to reflect and even perpetuate social injustice rather than challenge and overcome it. In the developed world, while schools, universities, and inspired individuals working in them struggle to redress imbalances and inequity every day, the term 'wicked problems' (Gibbs, 2013; Krause, 2012; Rittel & Webber, 1973) has been used as a rather quaint description of the seemingly intractable divisions and patterns that continue, as educational reform initiatives come and go with little to no impact.

Even where education is taking place in the so-called "developing world", the trend is for this to be *adding* to global inequality rather than the opposite. This happens in two main ways. The first is the now well-documented brain-(and associated capital)-drain caused by the massive market for overseas students in the advanced capitalist countries; a market worth billions in several countries, Australia included, as noted by one report,

[s] imilar statistics can be cited for the other major host countries. Indeed, Australia earns US\$17 billion from international scholars, and in the United Kingdom higher education is a US\$21 billion earner. Both have clearly stated national policies to increase income from overseas students (IEAC, 2013).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2009, "over one in five (22%) tertiary students studying in Australia were international students" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). While some decline has occurred, associated with the global financial slump, it is clearly the case that advanced capitalist countries are making good money from Third World students; money that would otherwise stay at home if "developing" countries could provide competitive educational environments and jobs.

This relates to the second issue that is further undermining educational success in the Third World. Although many students in Third World economies may and do make it through to higher education, their chances of employment are increasingly weak. In Tunisia, for example, “40% of university graduates are unemployed against 24% of non-graduates” (Fraser, 2011). This is similar for many of the Third World countries that are often held up as economic success stories despite material realities suggesting differently. For example in Egypt, according to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, “people with some university background represent 32 per cent of the unemployed” (Goudineau, 2012, p. para 8). As McLean notes, “(k)nowledge accumulation and production, then, are yet another site where the new inequalities are becoming more evident” (2004, p. 5). Qualifications are no guarantee of employment and even less so of living wages and a decent standard of living, especially with the ceaseless proletarianisation of many economic sectors.<sup>1</sup>

Talking about education for the 3 billion people who currently subsist on less than \$3 a day, in a world where prices and expectations are increasingly internationalised, seems like an exercise in cruelty or cynicism. Indeed it is naive to consider educational innovation as a socially reforming tool in the context of a global socio-economic order where the wealthiest few thousand do better than the wealthiest few billion. But as argued above, this is not just a problem for those in the misnamed “developing world”, with the limited possibilities of social mobility not just restricted to Third World economies. According to Hertz, in the USA “children from low-income families have only a 1 per cent chance of reaching the top 5 per cent of the income distribution, versus children of the rich who have about a 22 per cent chance” (2006, p. i).

Despite some persistent and optimistic notions that it is otherwise, Australia is not immune to what is a global trend of increasing inequality, as wealth is shifted from the poor to the rich (Harvey, 2007). One of a handful of privileged, wealthy nations globally, the ‘lucky country’ has high levels of inequality in terms of all major social and economic indicators compared to other OECD countries (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2012). One study of note described it as the 4<sup>th</sup> most unequal of OECD

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<sup>1</sup> This is all to say nothing of the questions of curricula, the hidden curriculum (Hill, 2001b; McLaren, 2000; 2009, p. 75) and educational content in general, that many would argue are at the basis of a cultural poverty which itself generates issues of equity considered beyond questions of access to schooling.

countries after the USA, Portugal and Britain, importantly reflecting on links between income inequality and a range of social indices such as child wellbeing, imprisonment rates, drug abuse, violence, mental and physical health, community trust, educational opportunity and social mobility (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Particularly telling is the point made in a 2005 study into inequality in Australia that around 80% of Australian employees were earning less than \$60,000 per annum (Wicks, 2005). Such statistics are important in challenging dogged insinuations that inequity and inequality in Australia is not really an issue.

Another report documents the disproportionate burden of increasing inequality and hardship on young people in terms of unemployment as well as lack of job security and under-employment (Commonwealth Bank of Australia, 2010) and the recently released Report Card from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2013) notes that despite a 'strong economy' youth unemployment continues to increase with one in six young people not in education or in employment. The ARACY report also notes that youth unemployment is increasing at double the rate of unemployment generally with even higher rates for indigenous youth.

Reports on national and international tests aimed at benchmarking both quality and equity in education, continue to note that although fairing comparatively well in terms of 'quality', Australia performs poorly in terms of equity, with patterns of disadvantage connecting low socio-economic status, geography, indigeneity and refugee status to poorer outcomes continuing and in some cases worsening over recent years (Nous Group & Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2011; Thomson, 2013a, 2013b; Thomson, Bortoli, & Buckley, 2013). Decades of research have documented the links between recurrently poor educational outcomes in some communities and patterns of disadvantage and social exclusion, with socio-economic barriers ensuring that the successful further and higher education outcomes cited as most likely to ensure future economic and social stability, remain out of reach for many here in Australia (Long, 2005). The patterns of inequality and the causes are the same. In this context, achieving educational equity as the key means to addressing social inequality is an important global debate, with educational access and success positioned centrally in a broader social inclusion agenda.

## Education and Social Justice

Liberal society has by and large considered education a fundamental lever for progress, justice and social change. Liberal policy in the 1930s, as well as post-war, exemplified this approach, with capitalist expansion and growth providing the basis for liberal policy couched in terms of welfare, equity and opportunity; most famously espoused in Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms address.

There is nothing mysterious about the foundations of a healthy and strong democracy. The basic things expected by our people of their political and economic systems are simple. They are: Equality of opportunity for youth and for others; Jobs for those who can work; Security for those who need it; The ending of special privilege for the few; The preservation of civil liberties for all (Roosevelt, 1941).

However, the era of progressive or social liberalism (social-democracy) is certainly a relic of the past (Harvey, 2007; Wallerstein, 1995). Neoliberalism has no room for any considerations that do not square with the bottom line - not in terms of substantive policy, as distinct to rhetoric and academic discourses. Education is now treated just like home equity, a commodity for sale on a market that benefits some much more than others, inevitably involving winners and losers (Down, 2009).

The “new paternalism” (MacGregor, 1999) gives lip service to equity and justice in education, while in fact substituting 'aspiration' and 'achievement' for 'equity' and 'learning' respectively. Highlighting how Neoliberalism has failed to provide enrichment or even betterment for most, the emphasis has been shifted to the responsibility of individuals, where “the main stress is on getting the poor and those receiving public services to change their behaviour and act more responsibly. The basically liberal idea that the better-off might have obligations to the poor, that the healthy might have obligations to the sick, and that the lucky should aid the unlucky” (Down, 2009, p. 108) has been abandoned.

Since the global financial collapse of 2008, Neoliberalism has been experiencing not only the self-evident economic crisis but arguably also a growing crisis of cultural and ideological legitimacy (Duménil & Lévy, 2011). This has created an opening for a renewed critique of neoliberal policy. To some extent, at least in the first instance, this

vacuum has created a new space for an otherwise bankrupt social democracy and left of centre politics and policy. Where such left of centre policy has been forced into public debate by significant and long standing social mobilisations (such as in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, see for example Petras & Veltmeyer, 2005) it can include substantial funding for the purpose of social amelioration. However, the framework of all such Third Way policy is anti-welfare in the classical sense. The starting point is not that capitalism has losers and they should be looked after but rather that everyone can be a winner and any social spending should be framed in terms of improving the individual's market position. These Third Way exponents have used the language of liberal left discourse not to revive welfarism, but to take the opportunity to extend the reach of neoliberal individualism to every last corner of social organisation, even where previously public good may have prevailed (Cammack, 2007).

Despite, or through the language of cooperation, reciprocity and mutual benefit, Neoliberalism has driven the development of educational partnerships and informed the concept of *engagement* in education. In this respect, the concepts of partnership and engagement in education policy tend to become code for marketisation and commercialisation in one of the last remaining 'public utilities' of global capitalism. The good news is that universities and schools don't always do what they're told. While the academy has been increasingly enslaved by the corporate world, it has other forces to answer to. Many academics (and students) still harbour enlightenment sentiments that re-emerged with the massification of higher education during the post-war period. Schools, teachers, students and parents are standing up and fighting back against the corporatisation and standardisation of learning and teaching. And the world is changing - it never stays the same. Many school-university-community engagement activities are inspired and driven by these aspirations. But these are tension-filled partnerships in a time of neoliberal crisis.

## **This study**

Educational institutions internationally are now engaged in a myriad of activity under the banners of engagement and partnerships. While diverse in perspectives and practice, such activity is invariably conducted in the name of capacity-building and improved

outcomes. An enormous amount of energy, and in many cases passion, is being invested into these initiatives, which are regarded as central to a response to the current context of persistent educational and social inequality. Many of the dedicated practitioners and academics working within these initiatives view them as challenging and ameliorating the worst effects of the neoliberal framework for education. Indeed they are often presented as *the* progressive educational response to educational inequality.

A critical investigation of such partnership activity reveals the ways in which they can reflect part of the general shift from the public (conceived of in terms of the old welfare state) to the private, and are often not only *reflective of* but also *characterised by* neoliberal values and outcomes. Despite a significant amount of research on the limitations, challenges and problems of working within such partnerships, the literature has largely (not entirely) neglected to adequately identify, describe and critique the neoliberal character of such activity, and the ways in which progressive and even radical terminology has been usurped. Moreover, the practice of partnerships, conceived of as community driven, democratic and public, has been lacking in theoretical framework, and as such there are few contributions to perspectives for politically progressive/transformational or radical partnership activity.

How might institutions and individuals react to such a perturbing characterisation of university-school-community collaboration? What are the possibilities for achieving social justice outcomes through collaborative university-school-community educational initiatives in the immediate context of neoliberal hegemony in policy? These questions are significant, indeed pertinent now, in terms of meaningful and far-reaching social justice outcomes given the growing global breakdown of the neoliberal model, at least as a stable socio-political and ideological (hegemonic) project.

This study contributes to the development of a theoretical understanding of the partnerships agenda in education as shaped by Neoliberalism and as challenged by the growing crisis of the same. Drawing on an earlier formulation by Apple (2013), the intention is to explore the nature of educational partnership initiatives as neoliberal policy “with cracks” with a view to clarifying and making some attempt to theorise the opportunities for such cracks to be exploited to develop a radical agenda capable of achieving genuine and fundamental change. In a piece on curriculum, ideology and

commodification, originally written by Apple at the time of the birth of Neoliberalism in the United States, he suggested that

...(t)he real question is not whether such resistances exist ... but whether they are contradictory themselves, whether they lead anywhere beyond the reproduction of the ideological hegemony of the most powerful classes in our society, whether they can be employed for political education and intervention .... Our task is first to find them. We need somehow to give life to the resistances, the struggles (Apple, 2013c, p. 110).

Today with the neoliberal model in crisis Apple's cracks are more and more prevalent and his questions of greater interest. Apple (2007) has built a strong case for relevant, critical research that makes connections between practical experiences and struggles and their policy and structural contexts. His suggestions inform this study and have particular relevance for those of us in educational institutions engaging in practical projects that aim to go beyond increased equity and participation in education and connect with broader movements for radical social change. Apple's considerations provide a framework for a positive and constructive critique that offers possible policy directions, theoretical insights and practical initiatives to inform partnerships between schools, academics, teachers, parents and students aimed at fostering fundamental social change processes.

This thesis will argue that the partnerships agenda is best considered part of the web of the "new paternalism" (MacGregor, 1999); a new cycle of neoliberalism, expanding educational marketisation and commercialisation by further promoting an aspirational culture as ideological justification, in the absence of any meaningful possibilities of social mobility. Developing such an analysis is especially pertinent at a time of neoliberal crisis given the urgent need for alternative frameworks, and the associated need to identify and resist false alternatives promoted by besieged neoliberal policy-makers. Unless the partnerships and engagement discourse can be explained as a humanisation of neoliberal policy, the actual intentions and policy content involved must be analysed, and light shed on the limitations of such policies in meeting even their own narrow objectives, and also on the false expectations they promote.

In addition, a critique of the hegemonic partnerships discourse may contribute to further theorising social change education on the basis of a collective (community-partnership)

practice that includes the classroom but is not limited to it. The general question underpinning the development of such a strategic commitment is *what are the possibilities and challenges for educational collaboration for meaningful and far-reaching social justice in this climate of neoliberal hegemony in education policy?* Here Apple's (2010) arguments are pertinent when he argues that

(i)n engaging in such critical analyses, it also must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action. Thus, its aim is to critically examine current realities with a conceptual/political framework that emphasizes the spaces in which more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on. This is an absolutely crucial step, since otherwise our research can simply lead to cynicism or despair (p.15).

## Rationale

This investigation was initially conceived of in the context of a research and development project housed in a Melbourne-based university. My colleagues and I were interested in the effectiveness of such a program, which, within the organisational framework of university-community engagement, sought to develop meaningful partnerships with schools and the broader (regional) community, to improve educational access and success, and therefore, social and economic betterment.

The original idea was to talk about and compare practices, perspectives and challenges of the educational partnership agenda in the context of neoliberal crisis. I began looking at three university-community engagement examples: our own program in Melbourne, Australia; a suite of programs at a sister university in the USA; and an approach to educational partnerships being developed by a university in Venezuela, South America. From the outset, the project reflected a hybrid of my host institutions' interests and needs (was our program working and how did it sit in an international context, something I of course was also very interested in) and my own *burning question*: what can or might we do in education to really make a difference in people's lives, to really bring about meaningful social change?

During the early scoping stages of the research, my thinking solidified around a critique of the ever-narrowing view that educational success can and should only be measured in terms of private accumulation. In that context, I began to consider that partnerships and

engagement were not only unlikely to succeed as meaningful and community-driven cooperation, but rather they were likely to reflect (and indeed had themselves, in many cases, arisen out of) the neoliberal drive for further privatisation, load-shifting and corporate-driven priorities.

Early formulations developed through a review of university-community engagement and school-university partnerships literature, suggested two distinct and largely antagonistic agendas/possibilities for university-community partnerships for educational improvement under Neoliberalism;

- Further penetration of the neoliberal agenda into higher education
- A discussion about engagement aimed at social change and transformative education, with objectives antithetical to those of Neoliberalism

However as the research progressed this overly simplistic two-pronged hypothesis was replaced with a much sharper analysis of an engagement and partnerships agenda as wholly subsumed by neoliberal imperatives for education and indeed society. Such an analysis threw up significant challenges to the second possibility outlined above and raised questions about the opportunities for transformative and change-driven educational partnerships in a context where educational success is singularly measured in terms of private accumulation. In other words, even “the good stuff” which saw progressive educators working in projects that were explicitly about trying to challenge and ideally ameliorate the worst effects of educational inequality, was ultimately framed in terms of narrowly conceived neoliberal objectives. Educational success for social betterment was reduced to access to and equity of opportunity in an inherently competitive and exclusive system. Outreach programs, scholarships, capacity-building initiatives, partnerships and pathways designed to get a few more kids ahead in the game. Such a narrow view of educational outcomes was troubling enough, but became offensive in the broader context of reduced job opportunities, income security and growing social inequity, particularly for young people (Down, 2007).

It became clear, and limitations emerging in the initial data collection reinforced this, that to answer the research question about education making a real difference, the study had to go beyond relatively formulaic (albeit critical) program evaluation. Instead a

more fundamental question around how and why universities might partner with others to reimagine the notion of public good and how parents, teachers, community members and academics might genuinely work together in education to enable it was asked. The study as originally conceived had begun to feel like a mere stocktake of activity, an institutionally-bound review of practice, whereas the questions I was asking had moved well beyond the complexity of any one project, and towards a more broadly approached sustained inquiry into the contextual and socio-political factors shaping and constraining this whole movement. In particular this has necessitated a strong analysis of the so-called “third way” influence on the engagement and partnerships agenda.

The refined research question meant that comparing three international sites was no longer workable, given constraints around time and resources and the difficulties faced in terms of international travel to properly investigate practice in the USA and Venezuela, and the move away from program evaluation to more general and open reflections on partnership activity in education.

Instead the need for challenging and creative ideas to be brought to the discussion was identified, and amongst colleagues, parents and teachers a willingness to engage in a dialogue that sought to move beyond the limited and flawed constraints of educational partnerships under Neoliberalism was harnessed. In that way, my initial investigation of the distinctly Venezuelan version of *university-community engagement* did reveal a number of key challenges and provocations which remain useful and relevant to this revised study. As such, a brief consideration of the practices and their relationships both with and against broader political forces at play in Venezuela is included here as Chapter Seven. The experiences highlighted make an important contribution to the bigger story I am trying to tell here.

Another key finding of the initial scoping research was the distinct lack of opportunity for shared debate and discussion amongst the key agents involved in education. What do parents want from their children’s schooling? What do teachers think is needed right now? What do academics know about any of it and what is their role if any? How often do all these people get to talk together, if ever? What would happen if they did? What if together we imagined ideal collaboration across sectors from the point of view of what’s really needed? So many “partnerships” allowed little or no input from these key actors.

As a result of this shift in the research, the subsequent and substantive data collection involved a purposeful participant sample with a shared interest in reimagining education for public good, and a general agreement with the critique of the neoliberal agenda for education and the highlighted challenges for educational partnerships outlined in this study. Roundtable dialogues between parents, community members, teachers and academics, and e-interviews with education activists provide alternative perspectives and pose a number of questions and challenges for those wishing to consider how collaboration through and for education might contribute to breaking the neoliberal consensus. The invited group was broad, including teachers, parents, community members and academics and the data were collected through cross-sectoral semi-structured group discussions, in the belief that a dialogue, rather than individual interviews would allow and encourage participants to listen to each other, and consider their own views in light of the broader discussion. The sessions were loosely based around four questions aimed at exploring views in regard to the issues involved in educational partnerships, as well as to stimulate conversation and thinking around a reimagining of education for public good.

Fundamentally, I wanted to take Apple (2010) at his word and go beyond critique to contribute to discussion and action around radical alternatives and resistance to the neoliberal agenda in education. I wanted to know what to do! This was not another review of the features of effective partnerships; work had already been done in this area. However having applied a political critique which characterised the whole partnerships macro-agenda as inherently neoliberal in nature and origin, I felt a responsibility to consider what was possible, what was needed, and to understand more about the potential of radical education activism to develop and implement alternative partnerships and collaboration in education, driven by very different objectives. In this sense the thesis was also driven by my own questions about being a critical activist educator, and a reflection on this process has been included here as Appendix A.

Apple's understanding of critical educational research is particularly relevant when considering partnership activity for social justice in education, if it is to achieve its stated goals. His message is unambiguous in calling for the prioritisation of a research agenda which seeks to develop, in close connection to practice, a new theorised

understanding of the impacts of a neoliberal agenda on educational outcomes and the development of an alternative model driven by community needs. It means taking our practical work seriously and considering it as much more than ameliorative work, rather, as a theoretical intervention.

Such a research agenda is further justified given the disparity that (by and large) exists between academic research and public policy, with research selectively developed and used by governments and public bureaucracy, as opposed to research itself impacting on the content and direction of public policy in any meaningful *democratic* sense. This process is dictated by the mechanisms of the market economy and has been widely discussed in the literature (Lynch, 2006; Marginson, 2000; Saunders, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) as part of the broader ideological and economic subjugation of knowledge to market priorities. Education policy is no more susceptible to the influence of academic debate or scholarly influence than any other marketable good has been. In fact, less so now that education has become part of the frontline of neoliberal dreams of market expansion and a renewed process of accumulation.

Many existing educational partnership examples claim to be driven by an innovative, collaborative, inclusive approach, with the needs of schools and communities as paramount. However it is precisely such an approach that brings them into conflict with the exigencies of the neoliberal agenda for education. One way to respond to such antagonisms is the incorporation of research plans that aim to serve as a positive, critical intervention into the policy debate and to contribute to the development of an alternative (counter-hegemonic) macro-agenda for education in Australia (beyond neoliberal education reform).

That said, this study is not conceived of as a policy type intervention, aimed at a seat on a table that Neoliberalism completely dominates, but rather as a means of informing and empowering the work of educators in the field, and giving them the hope and frameworks for building their work on the shoulders of communities of opposition to Neoliberalism.

## Overview of theoretical and conceptual framework

*Can you tell me now what we're going to fight for? World leaders are calling us to war  
Knowing that two wrongs don't make a right, why should I obey when they tell me to fight  
Arming up the world with their guns and tanks. Power for the pentagon and money for the banks  
Trying to make an enemy of you and me. An enemy mentality. I'm a world citizen...  
(Melanie Shanahan<sup>2</sup>)*

*To discover the various uses of things is the work of history. (Karl Marx)*

The aim of this study was to go beyond an academic critique of education partnerships and explore the possibilities of actual counter-hegemonic practices in the framework of engagement and partnership. No alternative approach to engagement and partnerships could avoid a foundational discussion of the meanings and purpose of education and its place in the system of schooling under capitalism. Firstly, Parenti's summation of Capitalism as a politico-economic system is instructive:

Capitalism is a system without a soul, without humanity. It tries to reduce every human activity to market profitability. It has no loyalty to democracy, family values, culture, Judeo-Christian ethics, ordinary folks, or any of the other shibboleths mouthed by its public relations representatives on special occasions. It has no loyalty to any nation; its only loyalty is to its own system of capital accumulation. It is not dedicated to "serving the community"; it serves only itself, extracting all it can from the many so that it might give all it can to the few" (Parenti, 1998, pp. 84-85).

A major premise of this thesis is that the formal education system is fundamentally a hegemonic practice of capitalism aimed at the reproduction of labour and schooling in the dominant ideology (Paulo Freire, 1970; Greaves, Hill, & Maisuria, 2007; Hill, 2001a; Ponce, 1993). However, as with all capitalist structures, schooling engenders dialectically opposed forces from within itself. The very processes of learning, however restricted, give rise to counter-hegemonic forces, actions and possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> These words are lyrics from the song *World Citizen*, written and originally performed by Melanie Shanahan and the a cappella group Akasa, now adapted and regularly performed by friends and I as the 11 piece Melbourne-based band The Conch. [www.theconch.org](http://www.theconch.org)

Foreshadowing the following discussion is an ongoing question for all radical educators

*Which of these might form the basis for alternative perspectives and practices for education partnerships?*

Drawing on a Freirean understanding of learning and education as a liberatory praxis this thesis explores the challenges, possibilities, aspirations and actuality of alternative perspectives on educational partnerships, and with the intention of stimulating further discussion argues for the need to develop open but coherent frameworks based on solidarity, struggle and hope, where public good rather than the market provides the compass for educational objectives and strategies, including partnerships.

It is considered that a relevant and critical theoretical framework for this research is provided in the sociological and philosophical traditions of Marx, Gramsci and Freire, and the contemporary work through which such traditions are kept alive (scholars and activists such as Peter McLaren, Antonia Darder, Paula Allman and Michael Apple). In seeking to understand the relationships between universities, schools and communities, the materialist and historical conception of social relations (Marx, 1983; Therborn, 1980, pp. 317-413) and the dialectical notions of change and interaction (Fischman & McLaren, 2005; Paulo Freire, 1970; Marx & Engels, 1976; McLaren, 2009, p. 61) proved appropriate to facilitate a study of the complexity, dynamics, inter-relatedness and potential future directions of educational partnerships.

Education is happening in the framework of neoliberal hegemony, but it does not do so without contradictions, fissures and counter-hegemonic encounters. All of the above theorists are part of a philosophical heritage that seeks to explain hegemonic forces in order to challenge and undermine them. Trying to locate and amplify the voices and forces of dissent is the central driving force of this study.

Therefore in this thesis I have sought to draw on and learn from the theorists and traditions of revolutionary struggles that have impacted powerfully on the lives of many and which continue to challenge the order of things. Whether the movement of 1848, 1871, 1917 or 1968, all have engendered profound critiques, massive movements and grand visions that still inspire. In Marx's method, historical materialism, the precursor to and general form of Freire's notion of praxis can be found. Along the way the work

of Gramsci, Lukács, Guevara and other radical theorists outside of the traditions of liberalism and pragmatism are also encountered, contributing further to our understanding of *globally conscious* human activity: human agency, authentic, informed and empowered. Common to all of these thinkers and of great relevance to this study, is an epistemological tradition of historical materialism, a class-centred sociology and a vision of the creative capacity of hope and love. Reflecting on the legacy of Paulo Freire, Darder refers to his understanding of love as one

...that could be lively, forceful, and inspiring, while at the same time, critical, challenging, and insistent... in direct opposition to the insipid “generosity” of teachers or administrators who would blindly adhere to a system of schooling that fundamentally transgresses every principle of cultural and economic democracy... [rather] a political and radicalised form of love that is never about absolute consensus, or unconditional acceptance, or unceasing words of sweetness ... instead it is.. rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with purpose in our life and to intimately connect that purpose with what he called our “true vocation” – to be human (Darder, 2009, p. 567).

The Marxism drawn on here is considered appropriate to this study, and viewed not as a dogmatic, closed or static method, but as an “open and critical tradition of revolutionary theory and praxis” informed by and growing through an ongoing process of critique, struggle, engagement and collaboration with “other emancipatory movements” (Löwy, 2005, p. viii).

In turn, this necessitates a rejection of the plethora of post-modern and post-structuralist assumptions that continue to dominate academic discourse, that is the generalised culture of de-historicised and depthless analysis referred to by Jameson (1984) and others (Callinicos, 1989; Hill, McLaren, Cole, & Rikowski, 2002). While acknowledging the importance of questions of culture and identity raised by some postmodernist authors, and the absolute necessity of continuing to draw on contemporary reality in all its complexity to theorise and resist the current capitalist global political order, it must be stated that postmodernist thought has not and will not offer any practical alternative social models, or means through which humanity might overcome the economic alienation it faces under capitalism (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002).

In education, as in any other public sphere, postmodernism's emphasis on infinite and hybrid perspectives and identities, through a reduction of political praxis to "particularized and localized acts of consumption in the cultural sphere" (G. Martin, 2007, p. 341), renders it incapable of envisioning (let alone organising) a way of uniting in solidarity to resist capital. By contrast, the revolutionary critical pedagogy employed here, informed by Freirean, humanistic and liberatory traditions in educational research, seeks to

... enable the most exploited and oppressed individuals and groups to mobilize their collective resources in order to overcome the limits placed upon their historically devalued literacies, knowledges, and social competencies. By positioning working-class and oppressed peoples as producers of their own knowledge, a revolutionary critical pedagogy interpellates them as historical agents who can work together (at the level of reproduction) to lay the practical foundations for credible new institutions of popular power, capable of changing their objective life situations (G. Martin, 2007, p. 345).

Such an approach underscores attempts to understand Neoliberalism outside the historic development of capitalism as a sham. Neoliberalism represents certain continuities and discontinuities in a historic process of capital accumulation, one which unfolds not only as the moving picture of the *forces* and *social relations* of production (technology, technique and division of labour) but as socio-political struggle also. Any theory or concept employed to understand and resist neoliberal education must be similarly situated historically and politically (G. Martin, 2007, pp. 342-343).

By aligning this study to such a tradition, and in seeking to learn from such movements and revolutionary moments, the aim is to rediscover and reapply the insights of Marx, Gramsci, Lukács, Freire, among many others. Such an emphasis requires consideration of the philosophical roots of Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy and the importance of understanding the world in order to change it, and here Marx himself proves useful.

### **The philosophical roots of critical pedagogy and Paulo Freire**

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, he posited that,

Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing

already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like an Alp on the brains of the living (Marx, 1852).

Marx's economic study informs a long tradition of critique; undermining the idea of the historic permanency and necessity of market relations. It is understood here that the capitalist economy, considered historically, represents a moment in human history; not a final moment ('end of history'), not insurmountable, but rather one in transition (Wallerstein, 2009).

Historically situated, education can be viewed in its contradictions, reflecting both the needs of capital (political-economic and ideological) and the impact of social forces (communities) struggling to develop counter agendas. Critical pedagogy draws on such a fundamental formulation to posit that "students and the knowledge they bring into the classroom must be understood as historical – that is, being constructed and produced within a particular historical moment and under particular historical conditions" (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009a, p. 10). Such an understanding then lays the foundation for radical educators and activists to work with students and communities in a way that enables them to understand "...themselves as subjects of history and to recognise that conditions of injustice, although historically produced by human beings, can also be transformed by human beings. This concept of student social agency is then tied to a process of collective and self-determined activity" (p.11).

Kincheloe notes (2007, p. 12) that critical pedagogy has its roots in the work of Paulo Freire in poverty-stricken north-eastern Brazil in the 1960s, and represents an "amalgamated liberation theological ethics and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany with progressive impulses in education." Freire's work leans on a long tradition of Marxist humanism, the most notable exponents of which emerged through the Frankfurt School. Among the central concepts of this tradition, are the ideas of reification and commodity fetishism, which Marx discussed in *Capital*.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's [sic] labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses ... It is only a definite

social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things (Marx, 1867).

The following quote from an article by Frymer (2006) on youth alienation in the USA, is worth including here at some length, as it explains further the important aspects of this theoretical lineage underpinning the Freirean approach.

Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" can provide critical pedagogy with a renewed basis for the political transformation and illumination of the everyday alienation stunting the humanity and social participation of large groups of contemporary youth. Freire's focus on both the social and existential subordination of the oppressed, as reflected in phenomenological experience and the objective socioeconomic conditions of individual lifeworlds, is central to a critical social theory of youth alienation in everyday American life. In fact, Freire's project, his pedagogy of the oppressed, is specifically concerned with the transcendence of alienation and oppression through the development of a critical literacy with revolutionary intent. However, unlike previous traditions of critical theorizing, Freire's pedagogy, with its roots in Marx, is based on praxis, dialectically combining theory and practice in its program.... Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed is based on Marx's critique of alienation as commodification. However, instead of limiting his focus to production and labor, Freire, like prior theorists such as Lukács and Marcuse, sees objectification as a pervasive social phenomenon saturating the totality of capitalist societies. The individual is turned into an object, not only as a labourer but also through a whole constellation of objectifying forces, such as the state, schools, the media, the family, and other cultural spheres... (p.102-103).

Essentially, understanding human labour (including intellectual labour) as alienated, is considered critical to the development of critical pedagogy. Here Lukács' understanding of the concept of reification is useful. Lukács argues that only when society becomes characterised by generalised commodity production, which is a unique and defining characteristic of capitalism, does the social and cultural power of the commodity become evident and meaningful.

Lukács goes on to explain further and is useful to quote in some detail.

What is of central importance here is that because of this situation a man's [sic] own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. There is both an objective and a subjective side to this phenomenon. Objectively a world of objects and relations between things springs into being (the world of commodities and their movements on the market). The laws governing these objects are indeed gradually discovered by man, but even so they confront him as invisible forces that generate their own power. The individual can use his knowledge of these laws to his own advantage, but he is not able to modify the

process by his own activity. Subjectively - where the market economy has been fully developed - a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article (Lukács, 1968).

As in the work of Allman (2001) and Martin (2007), the revolutionary element of critical pedagogy is emphasised here, rather than a sanitised version or simplified “methodological approach” that is “stripped of its Marxist concepts (class, ideology, exploitation, and revolution)” and “hollowed out and politically paralyzed” (Martin 2007, p.340). Critical pedagogy is understood as deeply anti-capitalist in sentiment and in terms of anticipated action – that is, through building understanding of how we might fight back.

As Fischman and McLaren (2005) assert, critical pedagogy is not just about a critique, a response, but fundamentally about the action that arises as necessary from such a critique, in other words, critical pedagogy comes with a “pedagogical mandate to transform... with the goal of radically democratizing educational sites and societies through a shared praxis. By emphasizing the importance of understanding and transforming pedagogical and social realities, it also points to the intrinsic relationship between education and the production and reproduction of labor-power” (Fischman & McLaren, pp. 425-426).

Kincheloe (2007, p. 14) talks about being *bricoleurs*, which involves refusing to accept as fact, the myriad historical assumptions and inherited meanings we are fed about the world, and instead seeing knowledge as provisional and “in process”, applying constantly historical, grounded analyses to lived experiences. A Marxist analysis of the ideological logic of capitalism is required, in order to make sense of the world in order to change it (Paulo Freire, 1970).

Martin (2007) sums up precisely how and why a revolutionary critical pedagogy is considered a necessary framework for this study.

Thus, when looking at the possibilities for political action in activist social movement organizations, a revolutionary critical pedagogy can provide the basis for working-class regroupment and international solidarity by developing alternative conceptions of social identity and subjectivity based upon a continuous

cycle of reflection and action that is grounded in the suppressed knowledges, skills, and social competencies of the working class and oppressed nationalities. The transformation of individualized, tacit, and everyday knowledge about capitalism into collective, explicit, and radical knowledge within activist and participatory modes of social organization has direct relevance to understanding the democratic process and the potential for creating a world community in which all activity is oriented toward the full satisfaction of human and ecological needs, whether through efforts to build citywide and neighborhood protest campaigns, or via major mobilizations to establish or reestablish internationalist organization, which is the aim of all revolutionary pedagogy (G. Martin, 2007, p. 345).

The pedagogy of Che Guevara, written about and discussed by McLaren (2000), Holst (2009) and Martí (1999) among others, but for which he is still not as well known as his revolutionary activity, is also considered important in developing general principles of practice. Guevara's views of "communion with the masses" and 'communion as co-learning" (Holst, 2009, pp. 154-155) are important antecedents for Freire, which Freire himself has acknowledged. As is the *grounded* theory that characterised Guevara's epistemology; that which Holst refers to as "theory from practice" (p.158).

However, most distinct and useful is Guevara's emphasis on the dialectic between leadership and mass and the pedagogical application: the importance of teacher as political leader/guide ('catalytic agent', to use Fals-Borda's (1991, p. 6) term) and of school as transformative base.

The university...should paint itself the colour of workers and peasants. It should paint itself the colour of the people... In order to reach the people you must feel as if you are part of the people. You must know what the people want, what they need, and what they feel....You must go to the people. You must live and breathe as one with the people, which is to say, you must feel the needs of Cuba as a whole (Guevara, 2000 cited in Holst, 2009, p. 156).

In bringing such a conceptual framework to practice, the work of Michael Apple is again considered relevant. Apple (2007b, 2011, 2013a) has outlined nine (initially six) tasks or responsibilities facing critical educational scholars and activists, and in so doing makes a strong case for relevant, critical research that makes connections between practical experiences and struggles and their policy and structural contexts.

The nine tasks are presented in abridged form here, taken from Apple (2011, pp. 244-247):

- We must “bear witness to negativity” - illuminate the ways in which educational policy and practice are connected to the relations of exploitation and domination –and to struggles against such relations – in the larger society;
- We must point to contradictions and to spaces of possible action - aiming to critically examine current realities with a conceptual/political framework that emphasizes the spaces in which more progressive and counter-hegemonic actions can, or do, go on;
- We must act as ‘secretaries’ to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power;
- We must ensure that the serious intellectual (and pedagogic) skills in dealing with the histories and debates surrounding the epistemological, political, and educational issues involved in justifying what counts as important knowledge and what counts as an effective and socially just education are employed to assist communities in thinking about this, learning from them, and engaging in the *mutually* pedagogic dialogues that enable decisions to be made in terms of both the short-term and long-term interests of dispossessed peoples;
- We must keep traditions of radical and progressive work alive through a commitment to documenting, extending, expanding, and (supportively) criticizing them;
- We must ask “For whom are we keeping them alive?” and “How and in what form are they to be made available?” and ensure our ability to speak to very different audiences;
- We must *act* in concert with the progressive social movements, be open to learning from these social movements and recognize that we cannot see ourselves as neutral or outside struggles for a different future;
- We must act as deeply committed mentors, as *both* excellent researchers and committed members of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities. This tense but deeply necessary blending of roles must be evident in our teaching;
- We must use the privilege we have as scholar/activists to open the spaces at universities and elsewhere for those who are not there, for those who do not now have a voice in that or other ‘professional’ spaces.

Apple’s list of tasks has particular relevance for those of us engaging in practical projects aimed at socially just and emancipatory education. In arguing that a redefinition of research itself may be necessary, he emphasises the practical role of such analysis, in pointing out spaces of possible counter-hegemonic actions, and stresses the need to employ rigorous research methods and skills in the task of reconstructing research to

genuinely serve progressive social needs. He calls attention to the need to keep traditions of radical and critical research alive, albeit with attentive and constructive criticism, and for the need for critical educators to relate to, act in concert with and learn from progressive social movements. This thesis constitutes one attempt to respond to each of those aspects of Apple's call to action. As Martin (2007, p.342) recognises, enacting such a revolutionary critical pedagogy is challenging and requires serious and respectful attention to local contexts, knowledge and experiences.

### **Relevance and significance of research and contribution to new knowledge**

This project adds to the current debates on educational partnerships and engagement through a direct contribution to the growing body of work on actioning a revolutionary pedagogy, built across classroom and (social) class. It does this by drawing on practitioner and grassroots voices to strengthen our understanding of the existing tensions and contradictions in educational partnerships, as well as to generate new ways of thinking about and enacting partnerships for socially just outcomes. Utilising a radical research praxis, the study generates grassroots insight into the possibilities of and for revolutionary pedagogical practice, aimed at informing the development of broader radical action aimed at interrupting and subverting Neoliberalism.

The emphasis of a Freirean dialogical method (Paulo Freire, 1970) itself proved to be a significant feature of this research, and an element which challenges the neoliberal agenda through its privileging of communication over the accumulation, reorganisation and reinterpretation of academic knowledge. The participant discussions give a voice to community interpretations and aspirations which are mostly excluded by the dominant discourses in public administration and bureaucratically driven educational research. Here the research has claimed legitimacy for the 'folk' knowledge (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991) of participants, providing an opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue, in order to understand each other, diminish historically held mistrust and establish common ground upon which to collaborate. The process, also intended to encourage the participants' agency, provided fertile ground for growing a rounded critique and developing potential alternatives to neoliberal partnerships.

This research also responds to calls for educational research to be relevant and responsive to contemporary social issues and challenges, and to the identified need to go beyond a currently dominant pragmatism and theorise the real consequences and problems of partnerships, and possibilities of a radical education project. In so doing this thesis contributes to the development of counter-hegemonic models of practice more broadly. Finally, given that education is presently at the forefront of Neoliberalism's post "crisis" repackaging, this work is of particular relevance as an intervention into renewed critical theorising.

## **Key definitions and terminology**

A number of key concepts or terms are drawn upon in this study, many of which can be understood differently by different people and in varied contexts. My understanding of these terms, informed by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks outlined above, are presented here.

### **Neoliberalism**

Much has been written about the emergence, nature and effects of Neoliberalism, which is generally understood in three ways:

1. As a policy direction emphasising neoconservative free market remedies for the decline in profits and prolonged economic slowdown following the post-war boom;
2. As a specific phase in what is sometimes referred to as 'late capitalism', reflecting a particular conjuncture in the development of the forces and relations of production;
3. As a class configuration reflecting the political defeat of the same labouring classes that had managed to secure the welfare state in the post-war boom period (Harvey, 2007).

Here Neoliberalism is understood in a multifaceted way, explained by Lipman (2011) as

... an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and more efficient. Neoliberalism is not just “out there” as a set of policies and explicit ideologies. It has developed as a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it (p.6).

In his now widely known text, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey (2007) defines Neoliberalism similarly, as

... in the first instance, a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices (p.2).

Generally speaking the era of Neoliberalism has been marked by a massive movement of wealth from the bottom to the top of the social ladder, overseeing a shift in public wealth from labour to capital through an ever-increasing dominance of market mechanisms and priorities. This is most marked when measured globally but is also a pattern to be found country by country, for example one report based on data released by the US Congressional Budget Office in 2010 (Sherman & Stone, 2010) shows that in the thirty years of Neoliberalism, the share of national income accruing to the richest 1% has doubled, to over 20%.

In 2007, the share of after-tax income going to the top one percent hit its highest level (17.1 percent) since 1979, while the share going to the middle one-fifth of Americans shrank to its lowest level during this period (14.1 percent). Between 1979 and 2007, average after-tax incomes for the top one percent rose by 281 percent after adjusting for inflation — an increase in income of \$973,100 per household — compared to increases of 25 percent (\$11,200 per household) for the middle fifth of households and 16 percent (\$2,400 per household) for the bottom fifth (p.103).

In Australia research has demonstrated a similar trend for the period we can clearly define as neoliberal (or 'economic rationalist', to use the more oft-used Australian terminology). Shields (2005) cited in Stilwell & Jordan (2007) explains how the incomes of the chief executives in the top 51 companies listed as Business Council of

Australia members averaged cash remuneration 63 times the annual earnings of fulltime workers in Australia in 2005; this is contrasted to 20 times the earnings in 1990 (p.4).

Stillwell & Jordan also note the changing share of labour and capital in national income stating that in "...2003–4, wages comprised 53.1 per cent of the total, while profits formed 26.7 per cent. This profit share was the highest share recorded since 1959–60" (p. 4-5). This pattern of growing profits at the cost of labour (real) income gains is especially noticeable since the early 1970s.

Throughout the period of Neoliberalism, Australia has been becoming an increasingly unequal society. A long-term analysis of income tax data shows that the top end of the income scale has pulled away dramatically in recent decades. It notes that

(a)t the start of the twenty-first century, the income share of the richest 1 per cent of Australians was higher than it had been at any point since 1951, while the share of the richest 10 per cent was higher than it had been since 1949 (Atkinson & Leigh, 2006, p. 12).

Harvey argues that Neoliberalism is not a new version of capitalism, but rather an intensification of capitalism and a means by which to reverse a range of political, economic and social gains made by labour during the post-war boom period. The post-war boom, characterized by economic growth and relative political stability, facilitated the so-called welfare state and the social extension of classic liberal values at least for the bulk of the first world's working population. Once this period had been exhausted and a crisis of capital accumulation set in, economic and political forces were set in play that would begin to reshape global society. Although this shift took some time to develop as a consistent and generalised set of policies, Neoliberalism has seen a constant and increasing distribution of capital and wealth upwards "while civic virtue has been undermined by a slavish celebration of the free market as the model for organizing all facets of everyday life (Henwood, 2003) [and p]olitical culture has been increasingly depoliticized as collective life is organized around the modalities of privatization, deregulation, and commercialization" (H. Giroux, 2005, p. 4).

Importantly this process has also been accompanied by a strengthening of the state as an economic manager, albeit in the guise of non-intervention and the "free market". As Giroux explains "[c]orporations more and more design not only the economic sphere

but also shape legislation and policy affecting all levels of government, and with limited opposition" (H. Giroux, 2005, p. 2). Harvey (2007) captures the essence of this contradiction when he explains the types of state intervention considered appropriate, and those that are not, in the neoliberal era.

A contradiction arises between a seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other. While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary associations (like charitable organizations). They most certainly should not choose to associate to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market. To guard against their greatest fears—fascism, communism, socialism, authoritarian populism, and even majority rule—the neoliberals have to put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions (such as the Federal Reserve or the IMF) to make key decisions. This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and ‘experts’ in a world where the state is supposed not to be interventionist (p.69).

The effects of such a contradiction and its ideological message are disastrous. As job markets shrink, the welfare state is systematically dismantled (indeed, it becomes the “welfare market” instead (Z. Williams, 2013), and social spending is slashed across all major sectors, including health, education and social services, individuals are told they are to blame for any ‘disadvantage’ they may face. The state, charged with failing to address society’s ills and even worse “undermining and stifling initiative and enterprise by ‘crowding out’ non-state actors including, most importantly, individuals” is “modernized” supporting a shift from a “culture of dependency” to “an enterprising culture” (Scanlon, 2001, p. 488). Through such a process, personal and individual responsibility is emphasised over any sense of collective or social effort or solidarity, as fundamentally liberal ideals make way for firmly neoliberal ideology (Cass & Brennan, 2002).

In this way, Neoliberalism and postmodernism have played dual ideological and philosophical roles (Harvey, 2007, p. 42) in that they both emphasise an individualistic and fragmented view of the world that undermines any potential for combined action based on collective struggle against capital through an analysis of the social relations of production under capitalism (Hill et al., 2002).

Discussed further in Chapter Two, the impact of Neoliberalism on education is an important part of this bigger picture. Internationally, the restructuring of schools and universities has been driven by the imperatives of Neoliberalism, to ensure students are prepared “as enterprising workers and citizens with the prerequisite skills, knowledge and values to survive in a volatile and competitive global labour market” (Down, 2007, p. 51). Despite paying continued homage to the ostensibly liberating character of education, learning under Neoliberalism has been firmly reduced to a commodity, with long evidenced issues of class and inequality explained away as a lack of individual effort or aspiration. The continuing attempts by governments, including those claiming the mantle of social democracy, to incorporate neoliberal values in a social inclusion framework constitute a dire threat to educational equity.

For education, Neoliberalism has involved increased privatisation of educational institutions (Ball & Youdell, 2007), load shifting, mandated standards and outcomes (Au, 2009), individualism and merciless competitiveness leading to winners and losers in the knowledge marketplace (H. Giroux, 2003). The impacts of Neoliberalism on equity and justice in education have been well documented (Apple, 2013b), with Connell (2002) describing the effect in the Australian context as being one of “a steady decline of interest in “equity” issues in education, accompanied by an erosion of the “idea of education as a common good” (p. 324).

### **Social Justice**

Social justice as it is understood here, is a concept with deep indebtedness to religious traditions. Its secular history is much more thin and contested. In the Christian tradition that has historically been predominant in the capitalist heartlands of the so-called 'advanced' countries and is still influential in terms of the cultural hegemony, the idea of social justice has its roots in the experience and thinking of the early Christian communities. St Augustine is often credited with the statement that "charity is no substitute for justice withheld", making a critical distinction between the ethics and politics of welfarism - at least as it has become tainted by Neoliberalism - and justice. There is a rich tradition of philosophical thought dating back most consistently to theologians of the Middle Ages, such as St Thomas Aquinas, which situated social

justice in a ‘mission’ for the poor and the excluded. The theologian Frei Betto summarises it this way:

One has only to open the Gospels to see how Jesus put himself in the place of the poor, without for all that falling into the trap of the kind of solidarity which makes poverty something sacred in itself. He did the opposite: he sought to bring the poor from the edge of things into the centre, from being marginalised to winning their rights, from sickness to healing, from hunger to bread, from sadness to joy, from error to pardon, from sin to grace, from death to life (1993, p. 34).

In the secular tradition, social justice is a rather thin, confused and contradictory point of reference. John Rawls may be credited with the most widely accepted idea of social justice, expressing a Kantian denial of utilitarianism in this widely cited quote:

Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others (2005, pp. 3-4).

This relatively negative and static definition does not do much to explain how social justice might take place or be achieved as a result of human action. Even the more positive idea of justice upheld by social liberalism and evident in the work of Dewey and others, falls short of the political commitment implied in the early Christian ideas; ideas that have continued to have a certain independent influence. Dewey recognised this as a problem of social liberalism, even where it recognised social action.

When it was said that the ordinary concept of desert concealed a momentous assumption, it was meant that the whole dualism of justice and love is involved. If justice be conceived as mere return to an individual of what he has done, if his deed, in other words, be separated from his vital, developing self, and if, therefore, the 'equivalent return' ignore the profound and persistent presence of self-hood in the deed, then it is true that justice is narrow in its sphere, harsh in form, requiring to be supplemented by another virtue of larger outlook and freer play — Grace. But if justice be the returning to a man of the equivalent of his deed, and if, in truth, the sole thing which equates the deed is self, then quite otherwise. Love is justice brought to self-consciousness; justice with a full, instead of a partial standard of value; justice with a dynamic, instead of a static, scale of equivalency (Dewey, 1897, p. 143).

Social justice in education tends to be reduced to ‘equity’ or even equality of opportunity, disguising a neglect for other dimensions of injustice. When these multiple dimensions take centre stage they are typically separated from the economic dimension; prone to becoming part of the Third Way politics of “individual responsibility”.

I argue in this thesis that the most useful idea of social justice in secular thought is associated with the traditions of socialist thought originating in 19th Century sociology and utopian socialism. The most notable representative of this trend being Saint-Simon, who sought in his work to reconcile the evident material progress of industrialisation and capitalism with spiritual values associated with community relationships.

Now, the most direct way to bring about an improvement in the moral and physical well-being of the majority of the population is to give priority in State expenditure to the provision of work for all fit men, so as to assure their physical existence; to disseminate as quickly as possible among the proletarian class the positive knowledge which has been acquired; and finally to ensure that the individuals composing this class have forms of leisure and interests which will develop their intelligence (Saint-Simon, 1975, p. 39).

This formulation from Saint-Simon includes the idea of a public good and the role of the state in preserving and enhancing such. What is lacking is a clear understanding of the nature of the state itself, which is something that Marx provided in his work of the same period. Marx considers the state in essence as an instrument of class rule but not without obligations imposed by the contest of social classes (Marx & Engels, 1848).

From these socialist traditions it is possible to develop an idea of social justice as the development of a social power that privileges collective action and co-operative activity, aimed at the development of society along such lines and uprooting minority control of economy and politics.

For the purposes of this attempt at a definition, social justice could perhaps be reduced to a single phrase that is associated with both Saint-Simon and Marx: "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need."

## **Community**

The highly contested term 'community' is one which is given a multitude of meanings depending on by whom, when, where and why it is being employed. Such contestations are important as they reflect socio-political struggles and counter discourses. Also of

critical importance is the distinction between the self-identification of communities as distinct to academic or political labels.

Cass and Brennan (2002) provide one useful discussion of this multiplicity of meaning drawing on the context of welfare reform but with critical relevance here. They outline the problems with certain assumptions about and characterisations of *communities* that suggest that social policy alone can address social problems and issues, with little to no reference to material (economic) reality.

Cammack (2007), in a compelling critique of sociologist Anthony Giddens' reconciliation of social justice with capitalism, cites Giddens himself to highlight how he has "reinterpreted[ed]... key social democratic watchwords in explicitly pro-market, neoliberal terms" (p.10).

'Community' doesn't imply trying to recapture lost forms of local solidarity; it refers to practical means of furthering the social and material refurbishment of neighbourhoods, towns, and larger local areas... The renewal of deprived local communities presumes the encouragement of economic enterprise as a means of generating a broader civic recovery (Giddens, 2007, p.79-82, cited in Cammack, 2007).

Giddens' perspective urges the commodification of community activity, with *community* essentially equated with *entrepreneurialism*. Cammack's analysis is powerful in highlighting the importance of the influence of theorists like Giddens on the sociology of education and government policy. A broader argument can be made that community has become the term of preference for government, as it provides a simple way of displacing and delegitimising any identities that reflect power and socio-economic differences. This way it is possible to speak about the business community in the same way as the Aboriginal community; as if they were just two of much the same thing. The community becomes an amorphous term to describe everything and nothing.

The concept of community is understood here as being both locality and interest based. That is communities are representative not only of people geographically situated and sharing space, but also of people coming together in conversation and action around shared interests. In the context of this study, an attempt will be made to recuperate the terminologies of Freire and other critical pedagogues, who speak of social class and

oppressed communities. Here, community is understood in diametrical opposition to corporate interests and control.

## **Partnerships**

The term partnership - while it has general connotations of agreement, co-operation and mutuality – in socio-political terms has evolved in the shadow of business, government bureaucracy and within the general language of liberalism. As with the term community, partnership is often presented as an apparently innocuous and instrumental term. In their work primarily around the emergence of and trends towards partnerships in the VET sector, Clemans, Billett and Seddon (2005, p. 638) define social partnerships as

... localised networks that connect some combination of local community groups, education and training providers, industry and government to work on local issues and community-building activities... [Social partnerships] hold the prospect of engaging communities with government and non-government organizations in solving problems, making decisions, and negotiating desirable outcomes cooperatively.

Benn (2010) suggests that “[e]xtant academic literature on social partnerships tends to be polarised around two opposing viewpoints: an idealised view based in trusting relationships formed through constructive dialogue and a contrasting pragmatic emphasis on power and instrumentality” (p.1). It is suggested here that any meaningful discussion of social partnerships needs to be contextualised in terms of dominant and oppositional trends in public policy and political economy.

Crozier (1998) argues that in neoliberal times

'[p]artnership', like 'citizenship' is... an essential part of marketization. Whilst the market fragments and promotes individualism, 'partnership' and 'citizenship' encourage involvement, commitment and responsibility. It is, however, an involvement, commitment and responsibility based on individual vested interest, indeed a necessary prerequisite to protect one's 'investment'. Thus in harnessing this, control upon the individual is exerted (p.125).

Despite the “eclectic and multifaceted” (Cardini, 2006, p. 396) nature of the literature on partnerships, it is argued here that the dominant theoretical paradigm driving discussion and practice around partnerships is essentially the ‘sociology of social

capital'. Partnerships are considered as a key framework for developing social capital on a local and regional basis (See for example Seddon et al., 2008). Both social democratic style governments and much of 'civil society' share this idea of partnerships.

In this view, partnerships are considered as a means for short and longer-term arrangements aiming to tie locally based networks and organisations with either (or both) other like-organisations and networks and/or government (institutional) bodies and projects, sharing goals or objectives. Such partnerships are typically conceived of as vehicles for building social capital and thus contributing to policy achievements in a determined field. In this respect, more longer-term and strategic partnerships "between NGOs and both business and government" (Benn 2010) provide a certain ideal-type partnership.

However the typical 'social partnership' often involves a triad of mostly powerless local and non-government community organisations, more or less powerful commercial interests and government (Cardini, 2006). Only the first of these three is likely to have interests distinct from and counter to market competition and capital accumulation. In other words, only the first of these three is likely to have an interest in 'public good' and 'public goods'. Business interests in the latter are at best tied to secondary moral bonds, which rarely contradict and supersede financial interests. Government - especially neoliberal government - is enmeshed in an obsessive culture of marketisation, sometimes more messianic than business itself.

Partnership discourse must start with a discussion of social power, with anything less presenting at best a limited analysis. Fundamentally this study seeks to further critique the notion of partnerships where equal power is suggested, when in fact the opposite is true. Conversely, this study seeks to develop the idea of solidarity as authentic partnership, with solidarity referring to the bonds specific to those oppressed and exploited. Importantly, it is considered alien to capital, where competition is the overriding ethos.

## Explanation of Thesis Structure

Having explained the purpose, nature, origins and theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this study in **Chapter One**, **Chapter Two** presents a literature review, including policy analysis and document review, to provide a coherent background and context for the key ideas and questions explored through this research. **Chapter Three** outlines the research design and methodological approaches employed, and makes a justification for the relevance and appropriateness of these given the objectives and nature of the investigation.

**Chapters Four and Five** present the findings arising from the Roundtable data collection and analysis, to explain and begin to theorise key issues and concepts arising. Chapter Four explores the experiences and perspectives of teachers, academics, parents and community members in working in and experiencing neoliberal educational settings, as expressed to and with each other in open dialogue. Their views on the purpose of education are explored, with the intention of considering the basis upon which collaboration in education does, and/or might occur. Chapter Five considers participants' views, experiences and questions for educational collaboration grounded explicitly in struggle and solidarity, the tensions and challenges, in particular highlighting accounts of their attempts to be and act as the kind of 'ideological workers' Freire (2005) spoke about.

**Chapter Six** presents a theorised perspective on the data and draws on 'activist' voices to consider how this research might inform educational collaboration for social justice and transformation by identifying and analysing the possibilities for finding (exploiting) spaces for counter-hegemonic practices that can contribute to breaking the neoliberal ideological consensus and privilege different forms and exigencies for partnerships, in other words, strategies for building solidarity. **Chapter Seven** presents research undertaken in the early stages of this study into the practices of university-community engagement and educational partnerships in Venezuela, amidst nationwide economic and social restructuring. Although removed as a specific site of investigation later in the process, this early research informed the subsequent theorising, and constitutes a useful contemporary counter-example to the neoliberal partnerships described and critiqued in

this thesis. **Chapter Eight** concludes the thesis by restating the themes of significance and outlining potential guides to action.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter presents perspectives on the neoliberal capital agenda in and for education, considering in particular the hegemony of neoliberal logics. The partnerships and engagement 'agenda' is analysed in that context and presented as one such neoliberal logic. An overview of both liberal and radical critique of the partnerships and engagement agenda is discussed, in so doing, highlighting the potential/s for radical Freirean alternatives and counter-hegemonic practices.

### Education and Neoliberalism

Understood here as a historically constituted institution, education is both complex and contradictory, consisting of socio-economic, political and ideological dynamics, reflecting both socio-economic progress and social power (Ponce, 1993). Drawing on a Marxist analysis, it is considered that at the socio-economic level, education acts as an institution for the reproduction of labour (Marx 1964), playing the role of developing the necessary level of labour skilling in any given socio-economic formation.

Education, education policy and educational relationships sit inside the political economy and ideological hegemonies of capitalism, not only influenced by them but in many ways *determined* by them (Apple, 1999; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Paulo Freire, 1970; Ponce, 1993).

Education under capitalism therefore is fundamentally designed to both develop the required labour skilling to meet its needs and reproduce the dominant ideology of the capitalist system. In their seminal work Bowles and Gintis (1976) pointed out the fundamental contradiction faced, as capitalist education aims to both *augment labour power* and *reproduce the conditions for its exploitation* (p. 202-3).

In discussing education in an era of neoliberal hegemony I argue that there are three fundamental aspects to be recognised:

1. Deep privatisation and re-allocation of funds away from the universal programs that made up the access and opportunity centred approach typical of welfare capitalism's education policies (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Torche, 2005);
2. The planned and deliberate generalisation of a culture of commodification aimed at changing community attitudes to education, eroding the idea of education as a common good grounded in humanist principles and replacing it with education as 'entrepreneurship' (Beckmann, Cooper, & Hill, 2009; Bullen, Robb, & Kenway, 2004; H. Giroux, 2003);
3. The development of a culture of control and regimentation in schooling and education generally, aimed at reproducing labour in the image of Neoliberalism (Agostinone-Wilson, 2006), with choice reduced to consumption; and congruent with the general development of the 'strong state' regime of Neoliberalism (Gamble, 1979).

In an analysis of education policy in neoliberal times, and referring to an "increasing subordination of education to the nakedly expressed requirements of national and international capital", Hill (2004, p. 506) suggests two major aspects of the restructuring of education policy: the capitalist agenda *for* education and the capitalist agenda *in* education (pg. 507, italics in original). Hill explains the capitalist agenda for education in terms of the "businessification" of the sector, in terms of the increasing corporate control over policy directions in education, and in terms of the ever more controlled and narrowed curriculum through decreased local autonomy and standardised testing. This can be seen as a deepening of both the ideological role of education under capitalism, and the task of producing non-critical citizen-consumers. In explaining the capitalist agenda in education, Hill discusses the opening up of the education sector to unprecedented privatisation and other moves towards the full and complete commodification of learning (p. 507-508). Although Hill (2004) is primarily discussing the UK and USA, the trends are global, with differing impacts in different local contexts (Ball & Youdell, 2007).

## **“New paternalism” and the “third way”**

As stated earlier, Neoliberalism has propagated the view of the minimalist state but has in fact rested on policies aimed at strengthening the state, in terms of its role in business, while minimising its role in supporting the ‘public’ (Harvey, 2007). The crisis of Neoliberalism has brought to the attention of governing elites the importance of renewing the state’s intervention in ‘the public’ for the sake of political stability but this time without spending (i.e. ensuring taxes on business are kept minimal) or building any ‘public sector’ as such. Enter Third Way politics and an impossible contradiction.

As profit rates diminished following the post-war boom, capital launched a three-decade attack on wages and living conditions, in the process hollowing out education as a ladder for social advancement (Harvey, 2007). Presently, in the context of the growing economic and even political crisis of Neoliberalism, with its increasing inability to provide wealth creation for the “middle classes” (Duménil & Lévy, 2011), centre and centre-left governments have responded by attempting to humanise the face of Neoliberalism (replacing ‘trickle-down’ with ‘hand-up’) without altering any of the fundamentals of free market policy.

Before Neoliberalism, education policy was driven by the welfare approach of post-war boom capitalism. This was premised on the possibility and desirability of full-employment in an exceptional period of global growth in production, where expanding the number of skilled workers was a necessity (Mandel, 1978). Welfarism, as a policy approach, was also based on a different balance of power between market, state and civil society. The labour movements that grew through and out of the Depression and sustained a social democratic ascendancy in the industrialised countries, provided a counter-balance to the power of the corporate sector and the basis for universalism and redistributive policies. As Coolsaet (2009, p. 108) describes

(t)he social democratic project offered more than just the defense of the weakest, however. By offering the outcasts of the time the prospect of an equal place in bourgeois society, and an improvement of their lot for present and future generations, it lent its own interpretation to the nineteenth-century idea of progress, inspired by its basic values of equality and solidarity. To realize such a project, power was required. The strategy for acquiring power came down to

mobilization of the majority against the prosperous minority and subsequently the deployment of the state. That succeeded in many European countries.

Neoliberalism not only reversed all these policies in practice but also promoted an ideological case for it - especially on the back of the so-called 'end of history', aimed at discrediting any alternatives. Much of what now transpires under the rubric of Third Way politics represents not a return to welfarism but rather a new language for couching neoliberal policies, a language of 'inclusion' necessary now that 'history has kicked back in'. The actual content of Third Way politics is firmly at odds with redistributive politics, preferring instead a "new paternalism" (MacGregor, 1999).

New paternalism is a way of 'privatising responsibility', or in other words, making the individual responsible for the social problems that neoliberal capitalism creates. As a policy solution it is made possible by the massive breakdown of class solidarity as compared to most of the 20th Century – something misunderstood by social democratic forces keen to present it as a genuinely progressive, new model (see for example Perkins, Nelms, & Smyth, 2004). Rather than the "pursuit of social-democratic objectives by other means", the so-called Third Way can be understood as a "recalibration of social democracy to the requirements of global capital" (Scanlon, 2001, p. 496). Particularly relevant to this study Scanlon (2001, p.496) notes how the:

... simultaneous commitment to community, on the one hand, and the pursuit of the market and economic globalisation, on the other... highlights the contradiction in the Third Way's elaboration of the virtues of community while appearing indifferent to, and even embracing, processes of globalisation which disrupt and 'hollow out' the social settings and relationships, rooted in tradition and place, upon which communities are built (p.496).

### **The political economy of the 'social inclusion' agenda in education**

Both the (recently ousted Labor) Rudd/Gillard/Rudd governments here in Australia and the (Democrat) Obama government in the US, (as the Labor governments in the UK had done previously), have placed education at the centre of their socio-political and economic agendas (Australian Government, 2009; Gillard, 2009). Third Way governments, struggling to redefine an otherwise historically bankrupt social democracy have privileged education in policy – based on a philosophy of "early intervention", elevating it to the place previously preserved for policy instruments such as capital

controls and market interventions. Education is posited as the framework for re-integrating the socially marginalised (social inclusion), developing opportunity for the “aspirational” classes (rescuing and expanding middle class dreams) and erstwhile restructuring the economy to improve competitiveness.

It is in this context that the former Labor government in Australia (2007-2013) sought to prioritise education policy, as an instrument in the productivity agenda. Describing her various portfolio roles, then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated in 2007,

In today’s world, the areas covered by my portfolios – early childhood education and childcare, schooling, training, universities, social inclusion, employment participation and workplace cooperation – are all ultimately about the same thing: Productivity. So while my portfolios can be a mouthful, I’ll be happy to be referred to simply as ‘the Minister for Productivity’ (Gillard, 2007).

In Australia, unlike the US, the neoliberalisation of education is still in its infancy. This is why governments talk of “revolutionising” education. Surviving the global crisis of Neoliberalism and emerging with a competitive edge requires a much more thorough marketisation of the education system than has yet been achieved by successive federal governments. It means expanding the education market to increase its direct profitability and extending the competitive mechanism and ethos throughout the education system to produce an ever more “flexible” and ideologically enslaved labour. Education, especially for Labor governments, is presented as critical to the necessary and continuous restructuring of the labour market, without which no amount of growth in mining and construction can guarantee Australian competitiveness in the increasingly cut-throat global economy. This perspective took on important ideological dimensions in the context of global crisis and the proclaimed exceptionalism (Colebatch, 2010) of the Australian economy.

The Rudd and Gillard (ALP) governments’ *Education Revolution* claimed that “quality education is good for our economy, good for our community and good for individuals. It will help create more jobs and higher wages, and will create better opportunities for all Australians” (Australian Government, 2008, p. 6). Productivity, participation, competitiveness and prosperity will all come, the initiative suggests, from ‘skilling’ and the subsequent formation of human capital, which then becomes available for use by

‘industry’ that in turn ‘drives’ productivity, global competitiveness and prosperity (Heimans, 2011, p. 16).

The crux of the current "new paternalism" in public policy is to marketise all knowledge for the “aspiring” working and middle classes and shift the blame of failure among poorer communities to the individual. The rhetoric of social inclusion folds into "individual responsibility" and schools and community agencies are charged with the role of targeting individual children and families to help them “adapt”.

Describing the work of the then new Social Exclusion Unit in the UK in 1997, Mandelson explains their motivations:

Our first efforts must be to help individuals who can escape their situation to do so, in the knowledge that personal skills and employment are the most effective anti-poverty policy in the long run. That is why the top priorities of our government are welfare to work and tackling the problems of bad schools and low educational standards (Mandelson, 1997, p. 8).

In the US the education imperatives of the Obama government’s *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* suggest similar goals:

Providing a high-quality education for all children is critical to America’s economic future. Our nation’s economic competitiveness and the path to the American Dream depend on providing every child with an education that will enable them to succeed in a global economy that is predicated on knowledge and innovation. President Obama is committed to providing every child access to a complete and competitive education, from cradle through career (The White House. Office of the Press Secretary, 2009).

The productivity agenda presumes that Australian capital will be able to ride out the continuing financial crisis and provide sufficient demand for an increasingly skilled labour market. However, highly skilled workforces are no guarantee of competitive insertion into the world market, as exemplified by the Irish economy’s fate (Kirby, 2002).

The emphasis of the social inclusion agenda is on labour productivity and competitiveness. This not only marginalises much socially useful labour, but also leaves individual educational and professional aspirations at the mercy of the global market. Neoliberalism provided the basis for three decades of profit growth but only on the

basis of destroying the welfare state of post-war boom capitalism. The future looks even bleaker. Unlike the post-war period, where the massive expansion of manufacturing provided the basis for economic growth and a qualitative development of education to expand skilled labour, contemporary capitalism faces a growing crisis of over-accumulation and overproduction and with it a potential crisis of markets for skilled labour (Dunn, 2012).

The education policy frameworks of most Western economies reveal tensions between the demands on schools and universities to prepare graduates ready to compete successfully in the global job market, and the aspirations for ‘inclusion’ that suggest that everyone, regardless of individual circumstance, should experience success in a competitive environment, despite the fact that it is ultimately premised on winners and losers. Heimans effectively describes the reality of the situation as a

a process of residualisation... the definition of a job seeker; if you are not seeking a job, you are not eligible for skilling. There is no skilling outside the relations between the skills and the formation of a capital that is recognised and (possibly) rewarded in the labour market. If you are not seeking a job, you are residual” (Heimans, 2011, p. 17).

These antagonisms were explicitly revealed in a 2008 review of Higher Education in Australia, known colloquially as the Bradley Review, (Bradley (Chair), Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) which simultaneously called for the continued and expanded marketisation of higher education and the inclusion of greater numbers of those historically excluded sectors of the population (such as low socio-economic, culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous communities) who are least well placed to compete in the free market. The message is that universities and schools just need to do things better, to more effectively prepare these groups for life-long success.

Underpinned by human capital theory, “best practice” is viewed as schools and universities most effectively preparing students for the world of work. Such an emphasis however inevitably fails to address even the most simple social and economic realities which interrupt such a utopian, idealistic path to social inclusion. The dangerous but unspoken implication is that despite social inequality, hierarchical education systems and a shrinking youth labour market, young people have no one but themselves to blame should their “we guarantee job-readiness and a competitive edge” schooling fail to result in secure employment (Down, 2009; Vickers & Lamb, 2002).

The partnerships/engagement agenda in education provides an important conduit for neoliberal policy in general, as Cardini argues

(t)he Third Way rhetoric, ‘governance narratives’ collaborative discourses and social capital theories provided the elements to shape, define and legitimate a new concept of partnerships as a benevolent, neutral and pragmatic concept (Cardini, 2006, p. 394).

Drawing on the UK example, Cardini describes how as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher oversaw a process of partnership development that simultaneously elevated and privileged the ‘private’ while dismantling (indeed destroying) ‘old’ partners, i.e. teacher unions. That process paved the way for Blair’s third way approach which rebranded partnerships as being about ‘cooperation’ and ‘social capital’, arguing for partnerships that ostensibly transcend the limitations of both the old right and left. These new partnership forms are envisaged as post-class, superseding conflict as a reference point for sociology.

## **Hegemony of Neoliberal Logics**

A clearer understanding of the political and economic basis of neoliberal partnerships is a necessary precondition for understanding how the partnership discourse in education becomes a form for extending neoliberal ideology. In Australia such discourse includes targeting ‘losers’ through so-called social inclusion initiatives, where they get a second chance to step up to the same competition (in education this means the same curriculum, same pedagogy, educational structures, with minor modifications at most), maybe having changed their ‘problematic attitudes’ or ‘lack of aspirations’ or improved their ‘cultural capital’! The policy rhetoric is grounded in a particular conception of equity and progress based on individuals and their mobility, which although ostensibly about inclusion, betrays the gutting of any substantive commitment to the public good and social or collective justice. Instead, as Hursh (2007) notes “(f)or neoliberals, those who do not succeed are held to have made bad choices. Personal responsibility means nothing is society’s fault. People have only themselves to blame.” (p. 497) Moreover, in education, “neoliberal discourses often reduce notions of social justice to access to markets, ignoring differences in access to monetary, legal and social resources. Such an

approach also eliminates the need to discuss different conceptions of social justice or the purpose of society, asserting that economic and technical responses to political questions are sufficient” (Hursh & Henderson, 2011, pp. 176-177).

Seddon, Clemens and Billett (2005) present a “critical social science” analysis of social partnerships in a neoliberal context, revealing them as a neoliberal tool to reduce social costs while individual (local) responsibility for social improvement is further affirmed and institutionalised. Concurrently, the full marketization of social sectors goes hand in hand with an increased centralisation of power and control through ever more accountability mechanisms. As Cardini (2006) argues “(t)he discourse of inclusion, participation and democratization seems to be obscuring, and therefore legitimating, the fact that public policies are still characterized by a central top-down approach” (p. 411) while effectively shifting blame to individuals. Cardini explains further

By affirming that decisions and strategies are defined at local or community level, the responsibility for failing outcomes is also devolved. Thus, if policies are successful, the central government can politically benefit from that success as they present themselves as the drivers of such policies. If, on the contrary, the outcomes are not as expected, the blame can be easily shifted to local communities or local governments that did not take advantage of the decision-making power and economic resources that have been devolved to them. As partnerships appear to distance the central politicians from the results of the reform, the blame and responsibility can be devolved (p. 411).

The state is conveniently let off the hook, with blame for failure framed in localised terms and addressed through

... ‘emergency measures’, like targeted case management of individuals, replacement of the principal of a failing school with another who has demonstrated success elsewhere. The localisation and ‘emergency’ character of these measures suggest that they are necessitated by the ungovernability of particular individuals and communities rather than acknowledging the structural and systematic character of problems like market failure or social exclusion. This way of framing problems encourages the view that local failures are appropriately tackled by emergency measures rather than by opening up political questions about neo-liberal social ordering (Seddon et al., 2005, pp. 29-30).

Seddon, Clemens and Billett’s (2005) description could be applied to any number of ‘partnerships’ between universities and schools, where ‘interventions’ are often based on delinking school issues from global problems of policy and focused on ‘improving individuals’ attitudes, behaviours and aspirations’. (See for example this criticism of the

AVID program at Victoria University (McCormack, 2013). In effect, such partnerships are about calibrating schools, staff and students to fit the neoliberal framework. Issues and problems are never considered as a challenge to neoliberal guidelines. In an article discussing the rise and legitimation of “post-welfare learning policy” and New Labor in the UK, Mulderrig describes a process that

...partly involves changing people’s behaviour and values in order to create a new self-reliant, risk-prepared, enterprise culture. Government discourse becomes a central tool in legitimising and enacting this transition; in a supply-side economic system, where the government no longer makes guarantees of financial support, ‘welfare’ must be cast in a negative evaluative frame, where receiving it becomes ‘dependency’ and removing the need for it becomes ‘empowerment’. Social services themselves moreover, are reorganised (or ‘modernised’) according to market models, in which internal competition is used to improve standards of delivery for users of that service who are recast as its ‘consumers’ (Mulderrig, 2003, paragraph 5).

The ideas of ‘enterprising culture’ and the individualisation of success and failure provide an important part of the compass for Third Way politics, replacing any old social-democratic and liberal philosophical notions of justice and equity. As Cardini (2006) argues

(b)oth networks and partnerships appear as an alternative to hierarchies and markets, and therefore, as a different approach to both the former Old Labour and Conservative programmes. Second, these two words share the benefit of their virtuous character. They seem to be a clear alternative to negative concepts associated to hierarchies and markets such as competition, bureaucracy, distrust, antagonism, monopolies and stiffness. In contrast, they are articulated through the use of terms such as cooperation, participation, flexibility, trust and confidence. Finally, both words are vaguely defined as social organizations that function on the basis of the interdependence and trust existing between different actors, organization or sectors involved in public sector delivery (p. 395).

Partnerships are presented as ‘collaboration’ enacted, and as such are made to appear as though they surpass or overcome traditional ‘problems’ of hierarchies, competition, markets, indeed all those irritating old fashioned contradictions between public and private. In appearing as an antidote to both old ‘left’ and ‘right’

...partnerships function as a magic concept: a concept that because of its links with other notions such as ‘networks’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘trust’, sounds modern, neutral, pragmatic and positive (Cardini, 2006, p. 396).

Third Way policies in education have retained the key policy handle of Neoliberalism in education, privatization and marketisation, and have added a complex of punitive *regulatory* policies aimed at ‘including’ those majorities who will not succeed. Such policies include an array of programs and initiatives that punish non-compliers – by way of social security benefits, managerialism in schools and general social intrusion (Agostinone-Wilson, 2006).

In his critique of Giddens’ third way, Cammack (2007) notes how despite the liberal rhetoric, the very concept of social justice is in fact redefined on the basis of capitalist logic, rather than being seen as fundamentally antagonistic to it. According to Cammack, Giddens is

... committed to the transformation not only of ideas of social justice but of all our ideas of society and of ourselves. The uncompromising logic at the core is that everything should be bent to the goal of making capitalism work. For this to happen, a commitment to competitiveness has to be part of the *general disposition* of every citizen (2007, p.20).

As McLaren (2005, p. 3) argues, “it is no longer just the capitalists who believe that they are the salvation for the world’s poor, but the workers themselves have become conditioned to believe that without their exploiters, they would no longer exist”.

Kincheloe (2007, p. 25) explains the challenges that such ideological hegemony presents for those attempting to counter (or at least those who recognise the need to counter) the ‘inclusion agenda’, which although “adeptly couched in the language of public improvement and democratic virtue”, sees

...students... transformed from citizens into consumers, capable of being bought and sold... The logic of this right-wing social reeducation involves the replacement of government service agencies with private corporate services, the redistribution of wealth from the poor to the wealthy, and the construction of a private market system that promotes the values of isolated individualism, self-help, corporate management, and consumerism in lieu of public ethics and economic democracy. Thus, the social curriculum being taught in twenty-first-century Western schools often involves a sanctification of the private sphere in a way that helps consolidate the power of corporations and the interests of the empire. In this context, the freedom of the corporation to redefine social and educational life in ways that serve its financial interests is expanded (p. 25).

Kincheloe puts forward the fundamental idea that the public sphere has failed and the private market is the most effective means of achieving socioeconomic improvement

underpins the message for education: success is determined on the basis of adapting to this (inevitable) reality. The all-evasive market philosophy renders the languages of collectivism, solidarity and transformation as obsolete, or at best so obscured that they have lost all potential to drive an agenda of radical change through a democratic and critical education practice. Rather, as Giroux argues

(a)gainst the reality of low-wage jobs, the erosion of social provisions for a growing number of people, and the expanding war against young people of color, the market- driven juggernaut continues to mobilize desires in the interest of producing market identities and market relationships that ultimately sever the link between education and social change while reducing agency to the obligations of consumerism (H. Giroux, 2003, p. 180).

The hegemony of neoliberal logics on educational partnerships is a critical problematic for those with a transformative perspective on education in that Neoliberalism's individualisation of the social seeks to deny the very possibility of social action.

### **Educational partnerships as neoliberal logic: Rhetoric and critique**

Education has been a primary site for *partnerships* and *engagement* activity as it has emerged from the political and economic context outlined. Rather than being seen as an aspect of the penetration of neoliberal imperatives and values however, such activity has been characterised in and through academic and policy discourses as progressive, equity and access focused initiatives.

#### **Universities**

For universities, the past few decades has seen a generalised call to reassert the 'civic mission' of higher education institutions in developed countries (see for example: (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2000; Brown & Muirhead, 2001; Fernández, Delpiano, & Ferari, 2006; World Conference on Higher Education, 2009), encouraging a plethora of *partnerships* and *engagement activity* ostensibly aimed at ameliorating the worst effects of the inequities of an increasingly marketised education system and couched in the language of community.

More than 10 years ago, Baird (2001, pg. 122) asked in the introduction to a special journal issue on Higher Education's role in society, "How involved should colleges and universities be in social problems? Their role could vary from activist participants to dispassionate analysts – where should they be on this continuum?" Today the proclaimed answer on paper at least is that HEI's (Higher Education Institutions) are and should be heavily 'engaged' with communities and major social issues, with Watson (2007) stating that 'hardly any university, anywhere in the world, would dare not to have a civic engagement mission' (cited p.1 in Muirhead & Woolcock, 2008). Despite such a blanket acceptance, things are considered to have stalled, with some criticism suggesting the engagement/partnering process has been inadequately conceptualised, and consists of disjointed and mostly fragmented activity (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009) that risks "standing for anything and therefore nothing" (Butin, 2010, p. 24). Cardini notes that much activity is branded as a 'partnership' simply to garner the political and/or economic benefits/kudos that come with such a label (Cardini, 2006, p. 397).

While in reality there is a complex range of motivating *and competing* factors behind this plethora of activity in the name of engagement, they by and large claim to be acting in response to demands that include greater social value, effectiveness, relevance, responsibility and accountability for increasingly diverse local and global populations. An inference of the generalised global policy call for HEIs to reconsider their social responsibility and to better engage with their communities, is that today's higher education institutions have lost their way, and need to return to their earlier more-noble roots, and engage with communities for mutually beneficial objectives and capacity-building. In certain key respects educational institutions have always been *engaged*. With few historical exceptions they have always formed part of the processes and institutions of social and cultural reproduction (Ponce, 1993), and under capitalism they have become increasingly important as an aspect and even engine of the economy (Callinicos, 2006).

The call for a renewed civic re-engagement can be seen to reflect two specific, contrary and interdependent dynamics characteristic of Neoliberalism. Firstly, and fundamentally, the momentum behind engagement is driven by the logic of Neoliberalism to extend the market to every corner of society. As argued earlier in this

chapter, education presents as still relatively unexplored terrain for further privatisation and marketisation. Secondly, as Neoliberalism has increasingly gutted the functions of social reproduction of the state, it has produced both the need and stimulus for a growing network of non-government agencies and community organisations (De Angelis, 2005).

It is in this context that the global response to the policy call for *engagement* must be considered, and the diverse range of initiatives implemented (including joint research projects, teaching and learning reform, increases in service learning, scholarship programs, collaborative partnerships and industry engagement (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, 2008; Benson & Harkavy, 2002; Brown & Muirhead, 2001; Butin, 2010; Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2008; Holland, 2005; Watson, 2007; A. Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006), focused in many cases on issues of educational access and equity) must be analysed.

The ‘partnerships/engagement’ agenda in education has been discussed, rolled-out and evaluated with great conviction, most often by educationalists genuinely motivated by a commitment to equity and justice, at the same time as universities themselves have been subjected to wide-reaching reforms overseeing their total subjugation to the logic of the market, to the needs of big business, and the commodification of all associated activities (Callinicos, 2006). Such a paradoxical context has fostered confusion as De Angelis (2005) points out in his discussion of governance under global Neoliberalism, speaking here about the rise of NGOs and other non-state ‘partnerships’ and organisations.

The rationale of the vast majority of these organisations which we must remember are diverse and heterogeneous was thus to fill a vacuum in the need of social reproduction, a vacuum created by the restructuring of the state following neoliberal policies. Whether through charities, campaigns to raise awareness on critical issues, or direct intervention in reproduction in education, health, or replacing welfare state through networks of churches or mosques, civil society organisations have sprung into public domains to fulfil human needs. In the eyes of the neoliberals, such an emergent activity of society self-defence against market colonisation, is seen as an opportunity to build “social capital”, i.e. to promote a form of social cohesion that is compatible with capital accumulation. But in the eyes of the millions of grassroots organisers, the opposite is true: their activities are seen, amidst all the possible contradictions, doubts, and inadequacy of their actions and discourses not as social capital but as “social solidarity”, i.e. a form of social cohesion that sets a limit to capital accumulation and the colonisation of life by capitalist markets (De Angelis, 2005, p. 241).

Here, Duffield (2001) cited in De Angelis (2005) is particularly insightful, noting that “the idea of partnerships forces conflicting actors into discursive common ground” (p.248). De Angelis explains the impact of this further:

The role of “partnership” ... implies the ideological belief that the goals of different actors are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, it closes debates on values. By closing the debate on values, partnership has interiorized the perspective of the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992). We are thus told that the only viable way for us to deal with major problems of the world we are concerned about is through *voluntary* participation in partnership with large businesses, their goals, their aspirations, their ways to do things, and to relate to the “human other” either as competitor or invisible, and to the “nature other” either as resource or invisible (De Angelis, 2005, p. 249).

De Angelis makes a powerful argument, that exposes and challenges the *discursive common ground* of the partnerships agenda, and the ways in which it domesticates and normalises market relations, and reinforces the ideological culture of Neoliberalism. As he argues,

Partnership does not recognise the universality of human needs, but the universality of the market norm. It is the yardstick against which deviations from the norm are measured and through which the norm and the social production of these norms are internalized and left unchallenged... Discursive common ground of this nature leaves out classic questions of political theory regarding social justice, social contract, legitimacy, authority, or power (p.250).

Given the progressive (and in some cases even radical) impulses of educators involved in much of this partnership activity, there is plenty of literature suggesting pitfalls, challenges and dilemmas. In partnership activity that point to important issues and questions, in their attempts to provide advice on how to most effectively and most respectfully ‘partner.’ Issues raised include the importance of trust, reciprocity and mutuality between all partners, with a focus on learning and changed practice; sufficient time and commitment, genuine institutional backing, clear and shared responsibilities; recognition of issues of power, class and culture and how they impact on potential collaboration; and shared contextual understanding of both educational institutions and community sites and settings. This work makes several critical points which do matter, and which have no doubt assisted in *improving* and *informing* various attempts at partnership activity (see for e.g. Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011b; Cobb & Rubin, 2006;

Gaffikin & Morrissey, 2008; Kruger, Davies, Eckersley, Newell, & Cherednichenko, 2009; Noguera, 1997; Schutz, 2006).

What is required, but largely (although not entirely) absent from these (Seddon et al., 2005) is a broader socio-economic analysis of the underlying political relations within which such partnerships are taking place, and the inevitable implications of that. While the insights such research offers are important in terms of generally *improving* partnerships and collaboration in education, they are likely to confuse at best, or thwart at worst, the very social justice objectives they seek to meet. In failing to reconcile the genuine objectives of the partnerships with the inherently antagonistic imperatives of the neoliberal agenda for education, they are likely to distort the possibilities for justice rather than strengthen them, as Freire argues, participating in the production of a false consciousness (Paulo Freire, 1970, pp. 72-75).

There are examples in the literature that seek to analyse and critique the contradictory imperatives for partnerships under Neoliberalism, ‘calling out’ the civic mission and ‘improved local outcomes’ rhetoric in contemporary examples. For example, in terms of partnerships involving universities, Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead (2006) note that neoliberal policy can result in an emphasis on increasing private revenue and input into local issues and problem-solving in an increasingly corporatised university context and in the face of decreased public spending. They argue that “...the deepening Commonwealth Government focus on competitiveness, commercialization and funding cutbacks as the key drivers of higher education policy” (A. Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2005, p. 3) constitute a significant risk to achieving meaningful community outcomes through partnerships. Buys and Bursnall (2007) also discuss partnerships as motivated by a competitive funding environment and the need to get a competitive edge in an era of tenders and quantifiable outputs. In the case of universities they also talk about partnerships as narrowly conceived of as recruitment, marketing, and improved profile/status exercises.

Fisher, Fabricant et al (2004, p.31) argue that decreased public spending and pressure to find alternative sources of revenue, leave universities with little choice but to raise fees income (one example is community engagement as a narrowly perceived recruiting

exercise), or increase privatization and corporate sponsorship. In discussing a definition of community engagement for universities, Sunderland et al suggest that

... as both method and methodology, community engagement can be seen to be heavily consistent with certain social and economic policy trajectories such as increasing focus on community-government-industry “partnerships”; economic rationalism or neo-liberal economics; the downsizing of public institutions and funding in favour of increasing industry and community funding sources; the move toward community based (as opposed to state based) “grass roots” service delivery and community renewal; and the assumption that knowledge and learning must always be “applied” or “commercialised” if they are to be of “value” (2004, p. 5).

Peacock (2012, p. 311) uses a critical discourse analysis to consider the language of an Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance (2008) discussion paper, and suggests an “uneasy synthesis of neoliberal, social inclusion and civic engagement discourses into a hybrid [university community engagement] discourse [which] semantically privileges neoliberal forms of engagement.” One example demonstrates how the text “collapse(s) the differences between business, industry, schools, governments, non-governmental organisations, associations, indigenous and ethnic communities and the general public and subsume(s) them under the term ‘community’” (Peacock, 2012, p. 318) as they are presented in list form as assumedly equivalent *engagees*. Another example is the “strategic neoliberal basis” identified through an effective hierarchisation of benefits to engagement. Despite the hybrid social-inclusion-neoliberal discourse citing a range of environmental, social and civic benefits, in the text “(i)n nearly all cases, when the benefits of engagement are listed, they name economic outcomes first, and only secondarily include social, cultural and environmental outcomes” (p. 321).

The following statement from Holland, a sympathetic proponent of ‘engagement’ reveals a similar privileging of neoliberal logic.

The need to direct the intellectual assets of all tertiary institutions toward the amelioration of major public challenges and opportunities offers a way to renew the role of higher education as a force for nation building and improving quality of life. Perhaps of even greater significance is the powerful role of intellectual capital in the development and success of all sectors of the world economy. Innovation is now the key to controlling world markets. *Engagement represents an adaptive response of universities to these new realities* (Holland, 2005, p. 16, my emphasis).

Historically, representing the partial autonomy of knowledge development, the university has often been slow to adapt to the political-economy around it (Ponce, 1993). The capitalist system has slowly but surely sought to minimise this 'response time'. Especially since the post-war period, the university has adapted increasingly promptly, growing rapidly into what some now refer to as the "entrepreneurial university" (B. R. Martin & Etzkowitz, 2000), reflected upon here by Holland.

## Schools

The engagement/partnerships agenda in education has by no means been limited to the Higher Education sector. Concurrently, schools, families and communities have been urged to *partner* and *engage* for educational access and success, to the tune of making a difference to young people's lives and to strengthen communities (Australian Universities Community Engagement Alliance, 2008; Bradley (Chair), Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Department of Early Childhood and Early Development, n.d.(a); Lonsdale, 2011; Maeroff, Callan, & Usda, 2001). Recent calls for school-based reform have asserted that partnerships between schools and other agencies are critical to the development of innovative and different approaches and the generation of an alternative policy framework of inclusion and social empowerment through education (Black, 2008). Again, the language of the literature overwhelmingly reveals Duffield's *discursive common ground* at play (2001).

The call for partnerships and community engagement through school-based reform is heavily couched in progressive rhetoric about improved academic outcomes, community capacity-building, improved quality of services, stronger networks and more *and better* opportunities and pathways (for e.g. Council of Australian Governments. Commonwealth of Australia, 2012; Department of Early Childhood and Early Development, n.d.(a); Epstein et al., 2002). Underpinning much of the argument that schools simply must 'partner' is an inference that today's schools are incapable on their own of achieving their 'core business'. The argument here is that nature and pace of change in the world has left schools ill-equipped to meet the increasing needs of an ever-more complicated society in terms of the development of our young people

(Hands, 2005). Hence it is argued that schools must “partner” to make a difference, and participate in

... collaborative networks that can address the deep systemic barriers that are preventing educational success for too many young Australians... for new ties among schools and school systems and between schools, their local communities and the business, philanthropic and community sectors that go beyond the classroom to create greater opportunities for children and young people (Black, 2008, p. 2).

In terms of partners themselves, the suggestions can be very broad, with Lonsdale, Clerke and Anderson suggesting a list including, but not limited to, people working in local business or large corporations, Rotary volunteers, teachers in Higher and Further Education, local sportspeople, elderly people, pre-school parents and Real Estate Agents (2012, p. 2), as examples of those who might be able to work with schools to improve student outcomes. In the Australian context there are three main foci in the current partnership activity involving schools; Family-School Partnerships (DEECD, n.d.; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations Australian Government, n.d.), School-community agencies and service provider partnerships (Hands, 2005), and School-Business Partnerships (Business-School Connections Roundtable, 2011).

Throughout the 80s and 90s most Western governments introduced formal legislation promoting collaboration between schools and families and encouraging mutually-respectful and inclusive ways of working together for the benefit of learners. However to many working in and connected with schools there appears a significant gap between the rhetoric and actual experiences, with the stated principles and supporting structures for success (including shared power and responsibility, space for action, mutual understanding and benefit) unlikely given current realities. In literature promoting the partnerships, anticipated challenges are often mentioned, including a required cultural shift, (certain) parents feeling uncomfortable, imbalances in power and responsibility, and no or limited space for taking action. However, in the absence of a conscious identification, analysis and rejection of contextual and institutional factors, *better partnership activity* with clearer organisational design is posited as enough in and of itself to address deep and historic issues around the interaction between schools and families. Certainly it should seem obvious and indeed accurate that young people’s

wellbeing and positive outcomes can be effectively supported when schools and families communicate and collaborate, but on what (and whose) terms, and in what context?

Here De Angelis' call for open debate around values is critical, as the *values* of Neoliberalism run directly counter to the progressive language of the partnerships. Under Neoliberalism school-community partnerships are likely to instead be characterised by very different objectives, such as load shifting in light of reduced public funding, and/or as an intervention into the personal lives of families, and a basis upon which to lay blame at parents' feet (it is *your fault* if your kids don't do well, maybe you weren't playing your role in the partnership quite as you should have been...) for students 'underperforming' (McInerney, 2012). Such an environment is highlighted by one recent policy development in Victoria, Australia<sup>3</sup>, which emphasises the need for schools to be able to more easily enforce existing legislation, allowing them to financially penalise parents who 'fail' to get their children to school. The policy has been criticised by several welfare and advocacy groups (including (including the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2013) as a punitive and reactionary response to a complex and discriminatory issue.

It also presents as an example of what Crozier (1998) refers to as school-family partnership as *surveillance*. She discusses a move from parents being supportive but largely passive, to supportive and *active* in a range of ways that reflects the imperatives of neoliberal education. These include increased surveillance of students through uniform, attendance and homework mechanisms, which work to reinforce notions of 'good' students with 'good' parents who ensure the school is supported in these areas. Crozier suggests an ideological duality underpinning the shifts, where parents are monitoring teachers (pitched as 'keeping the customer happy') but also teachers are monitoring parents in their monitoring of students, to ensure school values are maintained. According to Crozier, this is part of a bigger project to challenge teacher professionalism and undermine parent/teacher solidarity as it had developed through earlier manifestations of school/family partnerships, born out of the more radical educational context of the 60s and 70s. The partnerships required today are not about

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<sup>3</sup> Parliament of Victoria, Education and Training Reform Amendment, (School Attendance) Bill 2013

teacher agency and activism, or communities joining in working class struggle, but rather about mechanisms to shift the responsibility, and also blame for educational outcomes, on individually underperforming teachers, or insufficiently supportive and attentive parents.

Crozier's research also highlights questions of social class and political bias in school/family partnership frameworks, and raises some of the issues discussed elsewhere around *a deficit language* used to discuss in particular working class and migrant families' interactions with schooling (Pearce, Down, & Moore, 2008; C. Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005). de Carvalho (2008) cuts to the heart of the relationship between the policy framework of parental involvement and the neoliberal agenda for education as she explains how

...(i)n constructing the role of the school as one of offering opportunities that individuals (students and their families) may use for their own advancement, this policy is blind to both the external social function and internal workings of the educational system within the process of reproduction of social inequality, as well as to the limits of the logic of educational opportunity. Thus, it inevitably produces negative effects: students shortcomings can be attributed to lack of parental involvement, family apathy in front of the school's implicit and explicit demands can be addressed as cultural deficit, and the meaning of education can be constructed in terms of individual responsibility and family choice, omitting social responsibility" (147-148).

de Carvalho goes on to explain further the way in which the school-family partnership agenda primarily functions or operates in ways that shift responsibility for school success from social or public entities to individuals, in this case families.

While it is difficult to argue against the logic of better coordination and sharing of resources between schools and other community service providers and agencies, the emphasis on a *joined-up service provision* approach rings similarly hollow in a neoliberal context of short-term (and declining public) funding, lack of resources, interagency competition and so on. This is evidenced by the reports of local agencies and community organisations themselves, in reflecting on the reasons "inter-agency service partnerships" are less likely than "intra-agency service partnerships" to succeed in a climate of competitive tendering (Mallett, 2006, p. 104), i.e. that material conditions make success (even in the partial terms expressed) limited.

Black (2008) suggests that a policy shift towards more 'joined-up' government/service approaches has been informed by a growing understanding of the benefit of collaboration in education, and that intractable disadvantage has illuminated the fact that no one layer of government can address such challenges (p.7-12). The real meaning of the 'joined-up' approach in government reflects the generally corporatist approach of Neoliberalism. Just as corporatism played a critical role for Neoliberalism in Australia in taming the trade union movement - the Accord being especially indicative (Bramble, 2007), likewise corporatism has been revived in terms of social policy.

In terms of the analysis of neoliberal partnerships put forward here, the concept of "joined-up" government is understood essentially as code for corporatisation. Without such a sharp analysis of the political and economic basis of the broader partnerships agenda, the argument for partnerships made by Black and elsewhere, can engender confusion, and is likely to fail in explaining why partnerships might not achieve their grand objectives. As with the experience of the Accord (Bramble, 2007) in Australia, the rhetoric of partnerships policy emphasises consultation and co-operation but the (neoliberal) objectives of these policies undermine any collaboration directed toward alternative goals.

School-business partnerships (Lonsdale et al., 2011; Vindurampulle, 2010) are undoubtedly the most transparent example of the antagonistic nature of school partnerships in a neoliberal context. In terms of partnerships with businesses, Edens and Gilsinan (2005) note the stated necessity of tangible corporate outcomes. In some respects, school-business partnerships represent the carrot in neoliberal partnerships policy; with schools at least promised some tangible funding related outcomes. Giroux and others (Lickteig, 2004) have long written about the particularly advanced nature of these types of partnerships in the US context, with resource-deprived schools entering into agreements with businesses where 'free' textbooks are provided in return for advertising space and curriculum input among other things (H. A. Giroux, 1999, pp. 144-146).

In an overall context of increasing corporatisation of education and the corporatism of state policy, the 'stick' in school partnership policy (manifesting the strong arm of the neoliberal state) is the growing collaboration of government and non-government

agencies, and even media, in *interventions* aimed at pulling schools into line with neoliberal priorities and cultural propaganda. The most outstanding example of this in the Australian context has been the ‘partnerships’ of the Northern Territory Intervention and the increasing propaganda aimed at legitimising the extension of this approach beyond indigenous communities to working class areas. Although promoted as a “supportive” measure, the withholding of family welfare payments on the basis of school attendance has been widely criticised as punitive, racist and in contravention of basic human rights (Gibson, 2013; Pounder, 2008; Stringer, 2007).

### **Partnerships and engagement: contested ground, liberal reforms and radical potentials**

Historically, education policy has been applied both as a lever of social reform as well as a means through which to reproduce and guarantee the status quo of socio-economic relations. (Education doesn’t exist in a vacuum!) The foci of education policy debates relate to both general historical and political economic developments, as well as to the internal history of education itself and these must be considered dialectically.

Universities and schools cannot be considered only in functionalist and reproductive terms. They are both an expression of social relations but also contested terrain, and have since their earliest manifestations included minority and counter-systemic or counter-hegemonic, elements. In the modern day capitalist education system, there have developed radical liberal, humanist, Marxist and other counter-systemic ideological trends including not only academics and teachers, but the student body and connected communities as well.

While the discourse surrounding university-school-community engagement has emerged out of and is immersed in a neoliberal reform paradigm, as elaborated above, this occurs in a contested environment. There is a variety of individuals and forces whose interest in engagement is driven by social change aspirations rather than market objectives. Today’s environment of neoliberal crisis has arguably opened the door a little wider for education researchers to explore and develop alternatives based on socially just and democratic education, civic responsibility and the common good

(Allman, 2001; Anyon, 2006; Apple, 2013a; Darder, 2002b; G. Martin, 2007; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2002).

Not everyone is a 'committed competitive being', and many educators resist this logic intuitively. Nor has neoliberalisation entirely done away with the liberal attitudes and ideas left over from past experiences. The influences of more communitarian ideas and experiences dating back to the radical critiques and practices that characterised educational experimentation in the late 1960s and early 1970s are also present, though such ideas and practices are marginalised and are often co-opted by the neoliberal ideas that posit notions of social capital as substitutes for public funding, and glorify a culture of entrepreneurship as opposed to a culture of resistance and community struggles against the status quo.

This chapter has explored how contemporary education policy is fundamentally about the labour reproduction needs of late capitalism as well as its ideological needs and constraints. These fundamental influences generate contradictions for higher education as the current university, born of the post-war boom and deeply committed to the values of massification, comes in to conflict with the exigencies of Neoliberalism. It has also sought to demonstrate how the currency of community-engagement discourse is a product of all these contradictions. On the one hand it provides a framework of the neoliberal project of shifting from the public to the private, on the other hand it is a reflection of some of the aspirations of the post-war mass and progressive university. 'Community-engagement' in education theory and policy therefore represents an important terrain upon which a potential struggle between progressive or radical social reform and conservatism in the higher education sector could take place. A struggle that might contrast the view of community engagement that privileges industry partnerships and seeks to entrench and further legitimise the privatisation and corporatisation of education with the view of community engagement that values input from local and global communities and sees education institutions learning from these communities and participating in grassroots partnerships with explicit social change objectives.

The contemporary question of how universities and schools could, or indeed should, respond to the needs of and problems faced by their respective communities, intersects with the broader sociological and political-economic debate around how to address

educational (and more broadly social) inequality and its effects. The development of a thorough critique of dominant perspectives of university-school-community engagement presents the possibility of informing projects that intersect radical pedagogies and policies in education with social movements and action for fundamental educational, social and political change.

## Chapter Three: Research Design and Method

*The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it (Marx, 1845).*

*For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire 1970, p. 53).*

This chapter provides an overview of the research design and methodological approaches utilised in this study. It explains how and why the methods chosen were both appropriate and relevant, given the research questions and objectives, and the philosophical framework applied. It raises and discusses issues encountered throughout the process, explains why and how a major shift in research design was handled, as well as providing consideration of limitations experienced in relation to data collection and analysis.

### Introduction

My explicit political stance both underpins and explains the design and methods utilised for this study. As outlined in chapters one and two, my interest in this research is driven by a passionate commitment to contribute to a movement of rebellion against the current global political order, that is the dismantling of the neoliberal capitalist system as the root cause of oppression and savage inequality in our world today. This study is premised on the argument that the economic and ideological functions of mass schooling and education under capitalism are fundamentally antagonistic to social justice, inclusion and equity (Ponce, 1993). Such a perspective explains my adoption of the role of what Apple refers to as the critical activist educator (2011), seeking to “critically interrogate the pedagogical interrelationships between culture, economics, ideology, and power”, employing critical pedagogy “serving as a powerful lens of analysis from which social inequalities and oppressive institutional structures can be unveiled, critiqued, and, most importantly transformed through the process of political engagement and social action” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009b, p. 23). This thesis also demonstrates a response to Martin’s (2007) call for critical pedagogues to engage

in a *dialogue with the street* in that the research is both informing and informed by my and others' activism.

Therefore this project necessitated a research design and methodological approach that begins with an explicitly partisan stance. That is to say, an investigative approach that enabled sense to be made of the existing purposes in educational practice and their consequences, as well as to support, interpret and begin to theorise the emergence of new ideas and thinking around possibilities for individual and collective action. As a result it is situated within and inspired by the lineage of action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), participatory action research (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991), critical theory analysis (McLaren, 2009) and is also responsive to my own ongoing commitment to enacting a self-reflective, deeply ethical and most critically *active* approach in my professional role as educator (Fischman & McLaren, 2005; Paulo Freire, 1970).

In some important ways this study utilised and strengthened the Collaborative Social Research methodology employed in Williams (2006), with its emphasis on socio-cultural context and the incorporation of elements of an ethnographic approach given the intention to present a "socio-cultural interpretation of the data" (Merriam, 1998, pp. 12-14).

## **Ethics**

A rigorously applied ethical stance has framed all aspects of this study. In large part the major shift from the earlier conception of the research question can be explained as a question of ethics, in that I valued and respected colleagues and our work beyond what I felt was being offered through my initial evaluative questioning. In light of the critique of neoliberal capitalism and political commitments expressed, we, and our school and community partners deserved more. I am mindful of the openness of the dialogue, as participants in this study have reflected honestly and deeply on their workplaces, their colleagues, their political perspectives, and revealed many of their hopes and anxieties. It was a privilege to engage with such deeply reflective thinking, and a commitment to ensuring complete confidentiality and respecting the contributions as valid and

important has been central to the process. All names, places and other identifying features have been changed to ensure anonymity.

This research required and was granted ethics approval from the Arts, Education and Human Development Human Research Ethics Subcommittee, Victoria University (HRETH 08/183).

## **Research Design**

Based in a critical investigation into the relationship between university and community, this study had as a particular focus, an interest in the possibilities and constraints for achieving social justice outcomes through educational partnerships, in the context of the dominant neo-liberal agenda. It sought to explore the practice and conceptualisation of educational partnerships and university-community engagement, in historical perspective and in the immediate context of neo-liberal hegemony in policy, and consider opportunities for and barriers to achieving social justice outcomes through collaborative university-school-community educational initiatives.

The research design was revised through the course of the project based on a developing understanding of the deeper issues and themes underpinning the research question, a process which is more substantially outlined in Chapter one. The key changes were implemented within the scope of the original ethics approval, and have been summarised in the following table.

**Table 1 Explanation of shift in research design**

Original plan	Revised plan	Content and nature of change
Project evaluation	Political and economic analysis of 'partnerships and engagement' agenda in education	Deeper questions, greater emphasis on broad political analysis
Project comparison	'Global' view of partnerships or collaboration in education	Shift from case studies on three sites, to broadly theoretical and philosophical investigation
Individual Interviews and project team meetings	Dialogical conversations, cross sectoral, prompts but open ended	Broader involvement of active participants in education and in the community
Transferable model	New insights into perspectives and possibilities	Exposition of broad points of consideration for the development of strategic perspectives for community driven, subversive educational partnerships.

The research involved three main phases:

- i) A theoretical exploration of the notion of university-community engagement as neoliberal policy: this first component involved a Marxian analysis of the notions of human and social capital, the application of a rigorous political economy analysis to the *social inclusion* agenda, and the development of an explanation of engagement and partnerships as an example of "new paternalism."
- ii) The capture and exploration of grassroots perspectives and experiences in educational collaboration and activism. This involved three qualitative data collection activities; (i) interviews with university staff about *university-community engagement*, (ii) a series of roundtable conversations with teachers, academics, parents and community members aimed at exploring views in regard to the issues involved in educational partnerships, as well as stimulating conversation and thinking around a reimagining of education for public good, and finally (iii) e-interviews with activist educators about education and social change. These data, considered in combination, provided multilayered insights into the practical nature of educational "partnership" as well as a problematising of collaboration and activism in education by those attempting to work together in universities, schools and in their communities.
- iii) A theorised discussion of identified *challenges of educational collaboration for social justice in a climate of neoliberal hegemony in education policy*, and a contribution to the possibilities for actual counter-hegemonic practices in the

framework of engagement and partnership. This elaborated an argument for the need to develop open but coherent frameworks based on solidarity, struggle and hope, where public good rather than the market provides the compass for educational objectives and strategies, including partnerships.

## **Qualitative Data Sources and Analysis**

In this fundamentally qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) based on a constructivist research method (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) the data collection and analysis approaches were considered appropriate both in terms of facilitating an increased understanding and explanation of education as a socio-cultural construct in society, and for the purpose of contemplating the possibilities for struggle for change and justice. The methods employed, enabled multi-layered evidence to be collected, analysed and theorised as a means of generating new insights into the socially-constructed reality of partnerships in education. Importantly, the approach chosen emphasised the meaning/s that participants themselves (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) attributed to their experiences in and perspectives on educational partnerships. The data from participants produced new/situated insights into actual practice within a broad theoretical framework, and generated theory for alternatives.

### **Data Collection Stage One – Initial institution based interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university colleagues involved in the original university-community engagement initiatives in Melbourne. The following questions were used as prompts.

- Describe the nature of the project, the partners involved, and its key objectives.
- What does your work in this project look like? Describe your role in the project.
- What are the key (social and economic) challenges facing the local community/ies you are working in partnership with in accessing education, and in being able to better their social wellbeing?
- How well or otherwise is the work of your project integrated with/connected to the work of the wider university community?

- Are you familiar with your university's community engagement perspectives?
- What is your understanding of the notion of 'the engaged university'? What are the distinctive characteristics of an engaged university?
- What do universities do at the levels of formal policy and practice, under the banner of being an engaged university, and to what extent are their formal goals achieved?
- What challenges does your project face in achieving its goals?
- What challenges does your university face in being an 'engaged university'?

This data collection was undertaken on-campus at the institution at which I am employed, and the colleagues involved were mostly well known to me. The ethics and consent procedures were designed and attentively followed to ensure a transparent and consistent process where participants were comfortable. This first layer of data, which consisted overwhelmingly of descriptive, seemingly institutionally-bound reflection, exposed the limitations of the evaluation as initially conceived. By and large the data reflected on partnerships as 'work', with issues problematized only to the extent that they did or did not align with institutional priorities or exigencies. Although the colleagues raised important observations and thoughtful suggestions for the partnership work their institution was undertaking, the interviews proved limiting in terms of the actual detail required to shed light on the questions and tensions for partnerships in a context of neoliberal hegemony that had emerged from the literature review. The nature of these data revealed the need to move to more open, critical and action-focused conversations around the question of educational partnership activity. Although fundamentally driven by my own philosophical stance, the shift was also about enabling more voices to be heard and to extending the *conversation*. In this way the research questions were 'tested' in a far more thorough approach than initially proposed, using established methodologies consistent with the philosophical stance taken.

This first stage of data collection also included the gathering of background/contextual data in Venezuela, mainly in Caracas, through interviews, observations and fieldwork as part of a ten day Academic Exchange in 2009, involving volunteer participants sourced via personal networks and institutional contacts. From the outset the experiences of university-community 'engagement' in Venezuela were considered significant and relevant in terms of the international focus on improving educational access and equity through 'partnerships'. The data gathered around the educational reform currently

taking place, in the broader context of society-wide goals of social justice and equality in Venezuela, further highlighted the need for a deeper and more open exploration of the philosophical and political bases of collaboration in education, both as it stands and as it might or should be. The research around Venezuelan educational partnerships is included in this thesis as Chapter Seven, highlighting the major themes and their relevance and significance, as well as the role the data played in developing and conceptualising the overall thesis.

### **Data Collection Stage Two: the Roundtables**

The second stage of data collection comprised three separate roundtable discussions aimed at capturing perspectives and experiences through collaborative dialogue. The sample was a purposively selected group of twenty participants, including eleven schoolteachers, twelve parents, twelve community activists/community educators, and ten academics. Several of the group members ‘wore many hats’, for example as both a parent and a teacher, and of course all participants could lay claim to being community members. Those considered ‘community’ for the purposes of this study were those who self-identified as actively engaging in their communities in the broad area of education, as an activist, a community educator or volunteer. Each of the three sessions included a mix of all four groups. Amongst those who are noted as both academic and school teacher/TAFE<sup>4</sup> teacher, the balance varied, with some working full time in schools and with a sessional role at a Higher or Further Education Institution, and others with a permanent role in academia but with ongoing links to their earlier teaching roles and communities. Critically, the participants themselves embodied the cross and inter-sectoral understanding and strong community/local voice required to meaningfully interrogate the reality and potential of educational collaboration. Moreover, very few were working within formal ‘Partnership’ arrangements, enabling the conversations to have a much more open and exploratory focus. Table 2 below introduces the participants using their own voices, drawing on the autobiographical reflections they were invited to provide (for each other) at the beginning of each roundtable.

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<sup>4</sup> In Australia TAFE refers to Technical and Further Education undertaken in mostly state funded and administered colleges and institutions, primarily but not entirely of a vocational nature.

**Table 2 Introductory overview of roundtable participants**

Name	Autobiographical introduction	School/TAFE teachers	Parents	Community	Academics/ HE staff
Anna	Has worked at a secondary teacher at western suburbs secondary college for five years. Active in the refugee rights campaign. Involved in the Popular Education Network Australia (PENA).	✓		✓	
Bruce	Has worked in education for more than 40 years. Began secondary teaching in the 70s, currently working in teacher education.				✓
Heather	Former schoolteacher, experienced academic, currently in senior executive role at university.				✓
Heidi	Works as health professional, has a school-aged child who is presently not attending a school.		✓		
Jim	Trained as a secondary teacher after many years of activism, then worked as a TAFE teacher, currently working in HE access and equity role. Parent of primary aged child and recently exited student from year 11 now looking for a “pathway”.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jock	Spent 20 years studying, working and being an activist at university, undertook research. Have been primary school teacher for three years now.	✓	✓		
Kim	Parent of adult children, experienced university academic, former schoolteacher, currently in teacher education.		✓		✓
Lily	Worked as a youth worker, and then taught in an inner-city alternative school. Currently undertaking a master of education and working in teacher education. Parent of two school-aged children.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Michael	Involved in student representative organisations. Currently working with an environment organisation. Involved in a range of community education initiatives including PENA.			✓	
Nathan	Have worked as a schoolteacher for 10 years, prior to that worked as a health professional. Currently working in a special school and casually lecturing at a university. Parent of three school-aged children.	✓	✓		✓

Pablo	Critical educator, currently working as CRT (Casual Relief Teacher) at inner-city secondary college, began teaching this year, interested in critical pedagogy and radical curriculum reform. Identifies as an anarchist, and is also a performance poet and an activist.	✓		✓	
Patrick	Trained as a musician. Working as music teacher for past 14 years. Currently also lecturing at university. Parent of two small children, one kinder aged, heading towards primary education.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Phil	Worked for many years as a public servant before becoming a teacher. Worked in 5 different secondary schools before taking on a leadership role in one. Currently undertaking a PhD and working in teacher education. Parent of one adult and one school-aged child.	✓	✓		✓
Rachel	Activist in the anarchist community for many years. Spent three years teaching at a community school, worked as a researcher for a year and now teach at inner-west secondary school. Also teaches at TAFE.	✓	✓	✓	
Rebecca	Parent of four school-aged children, extensive involvement on kinder and school committees, in school support roles, as a school bus driver etc.		✓	✓	
Sophia	Came to Australia from Eastern Europe, parent of a child with a so-called disability, a learning difficulty, worked as a researcher, currently in professional role at university. Involved in PENA and local kinder-cooperative.		✓	✓	✓
Sue	Local community library educator, and lecturer in international community development. Single parent of two children in secondary school. Has also spent a lot of time working in the international development sector.		✓	✓	✓
Tania	Came to Australia from Central America, currently working as a TAFE teacher and studying to be a secondary school teacher. Many years of involvement in activist groups.	✓		✓	
Tom	Activist for around 15 years, started teaching in schools three years ago, has also taught at TAFE. Has been involved in grassroots political activism including anti-racism, international solidarity, refugee rights, anti-corporate-globalisation and environment campaigns.	✓		✓	
Will	Studied teaching, did honours and has just completed a PhD. Presently working sessionally in the HE system.				✓

The selection (invitation) was in the first instance, based on a belief that participants agreed in a broad sense with the critique of the neoliberal agenda for education and the highlighted challenges for educational partnerships. Beyond that, participants were invited with a view to their bringing creative and challenging ideas to the discussion, and a willingness and preparedness to engage in a dialogue that sought to move beyond critique, towards reimagining educational collaboration for social justice. It was hoped that a dialogue, rather than individual interviews would allow and encourage participants to listen to each other, and consider their own views in light of the wider discussion, stimulating a richer, more critical exploration of the issues. Moreover, in agreement with Ladson-Billings (1995, p. 473) it is argued that the generation of knowledge is a social act, and that “meaning is made as a product of dialogue between and among individuals”. Such an approach was also philosophically consistent with the revised research framework in terms of the questions being asked.

Each session was recorded and transcribed, and, as was the case with all qualitative data, the transcripts were returned to participants to enable them to confirm their contributions as accurate representations of their views and experiences, and also clarify or extend particular contributions or lines of thought if required.

From a sociological viewpoint it should be stressed that the groups were from a diversity of educational, class and ethnic backgrounds. A great deal of personal information, for example being the first in family to attend university, immigrating to a new country, developing different political views from parents, and so on, arose throughout the discussions as participants located themselves in the bigger-picture discussions on education and society. The generalised progressive or radical stance taken by the participants, as a purposeful sample, saw them engage with these personal and social themes critically, as they interacted with each other in and through dialogue and debate. Discussed further in subsequent chapters, the nature of the dialogue also profiled an emerging “political grace” (Darder & Yiamouyiannis, 2009, p. 14) amongst and between the participants. An interesting and positive by-product of the roundtables is that some participants formed, or in some cases rekindled, relationships that led to ongoing collaboration and political activism in education and other areas, as a result of shared discussions through the research.

The following four questions, developed in response to the perceived limitations of the data collected in Stage One and the revised research problem, were provided as initial prompts to frame the roundtable discussions.

1. What do you see as the PURPOSE of education? As it stands and as you would imagine it ideally?
2. Education policy is almost exclusively the terrain of government; how do you think that communities (in terms of locality and interests) could be engaged in educational reform and change?
3. What do you think could be worthwhile objectives for communities to seek in and through educational change? What do you see as the connections between educational change and social change and improvement?
4. What would an ideal partnership between educational institutions and community look like for you? What role do you see for the *primary* workers and users in education (teaching staff and students) in educational partnerships?

The conversations wove in and around all four questions and provided insight into the groups' experiences in and perspectives for partnerships as they stand, and the alternative possibilities they might imagine, based on their general agreement on and conceptualisation of education as public good. The intention was to leave the questions sufficiently open-ended to allow the participants to shape and direct the content, while giving enough direction to focus the conversations on the broader objectives and questions of the study.

The discussions took place in a naturalistic setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) with the researcher acting as facilitator. Conscious of Griffiths' (1998) cautions around power and exclusion, I was mindful of the issues that may have arisen in the roundtables, because they were loosely facilitated multi-person conversations. However, without exception the participants exhibited a consciousness around whose voices were being heard and people's opportunities to speak, which meant that although self-regulated, the conversations were inclusive and balanced.

### **Freire's dialogical method**

Further elaborated in Chapter Four but relevant here, is the power of Freirean dialogical methodology (Paulo Freire, 1970). Dialogue is a significant feature of many layers of this research, and an element which is in itself challenging to the neoliberal agenda; an agenda which seeks to isolate and alienate people rather than bring them together in shared knowledge construction. In fact one roundtable participant, Michael, in response to a question from another about what was needed at the foundation of educational partnerships, suggested

*...in some ways repeating this process, and doing it with everyone over and over again, would be the best thing that we need ...*

In context, he was contributing to a discussion about the lack of opportunities for all actors within educational settings, let alone across, and isolated from (i.e. parents), to engage in meaningful dialogue, in order to understand each other, diminish historically held mistrust and establish common ground upon which to collaborate. In this case, the method itself had contributed to the research question.

This study has deliberately elected to privilege communication over the accumulation, reorganisation and reinterpretation of academicised knowledge. Leaning on the tradition of Participatory Action Research and in particular Fals Borda (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991), the research has claimed legitimacy for the 'folk' knowledge of participants, encouraged their agency and sought to draw out a totality from the research conversations and their solidarity that amounts to something much more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, the work of Darder has informed this investigation, through its emphasis on open, dialogical, respectful collaboration in order to make meaning of our lives and the struggles we engage in, in particular through the notion of *political grace* for example as discussed with Yiamouyiannis (Darder & Yiamouyiannis, 2009).

### **Data Collection Stage Three - The extension e-interviews**

Stage Three involved extension conversations with educator-activists. One finding from the thematic analysis of the Roundtable data was the degree of political and strategic

hesitancy if not confusion expressed amongst progressive educators whilst thinking about the relationship between education and social change. The deeply political Freirean notion of educators as “ideological workers” (Paulo Freire, 2005) needed further consideration, evidenced by very specific questions about educational activism and political struggle raised by the roundtable participants. At this point my own activism and collective engagement in educational partnerships with other activists provided an opportunity to pursue this theme, through interviews with fellow activists. Hence a final round of extension e-interviews was conducted, inviting educator-activists from the membership of a particular educational partnership activity the Popular Education Network Australia (PENA) (Ollis, Williams, Townsend, Harris, & Jorquera, 2012) to participate.

Ten invitees agreed to participate in the e-interviews. They were provided with an overview of the study to date, including details of the Roundtable discussions, and asked to respond to the following three questions as prompts;

1. Why did you join PENA and what do you hope to achieve through your involvement in PENA? What objectives and hopes drive your involvement?

2. These are three quotes from my roundtable discussions:

*...I feel that you carve out spaces... somebody was looking at VELs<sup>5</sup>... and how neoliberal all the ideas within VELs were, and I kept saying, oh but you just shut the door and do what you want! But he didn't see that as a valid analysis because he was interested in the structural... I can understand that maybe that is where change needs to occur, but for me, you kind of just do what you can at the grassroots and you just spread that as much as you can, and that the more people are doing that and carving out those spaces, for me, that actually has greater potential for change, than to try and combat it at a systemic level (teacher).*

*... you're constantly throwing sand into the machine, you've gotta always see yourself as a teacher and an activist doing whatever is possible within your capacity to change things, and definitely our major concern, on one level it is the broader structural things that need to be changed and then in the classroom it's our pedagogy and what we do, and it's about seeing*

<sup>5</sup> The Victorian Essential Learning Standards is the curriculum framework for schools in Victoria, Australia for grades Preparatory to Year 10.

*yourself as an agent within that, within that social change and seeing your students as agents of that also (teacher).*

*...that's not enough, I mean to put sand in the system is good, but to work just within your own classroom is kind of like, yes, that's good, and I cherish the good teachers my kids have had, but it's not enough (parent).*

For many progressive and radical teachers/academics, the classroom is something like a haven for 'carving out spaces' for positive learning and exploring the possibilities of change and social alternatives. In your view how can this be resolved with the fact that social change is a 'global' problem? In what ways does this impact on your practice and what possibilities do you conceive for matching your aspirations for the classroom with those you have for global social change?

3. Paulo Freire considers educators as “ideological workers” who permanently face being drawn into teaching, apologising and modelling for capitalism. If we accept that, how do you see your role as a subversive, counter-ideological educator? What does Freire’s notion of “concientization” mean to you?

The purpose of the e-interviews was to generate another layer of understanding (deeper insight) around two key emergent themes from the Roundtable data:

- Describing and problematising resistance
- Democratic spaces and systemic change.

The participants drew directly from their concrete experiences as educational activists to shed further light on questions of agency, the dialectical relationship between local and global practice and systemic change, and democratic spaces for resistance.

In conclusion, the qualitative data gathered and the processes used emphasise a shift driven by philosophical, theoretical and methodological considerations, from descriptive to dialogical and problematising approaches, interpretation and analysis.

## Data Analysis

Framed within a Marxist interpretative paradigm, which as Denzin and Lincoln note brings together emancipatory theory and sociocultural analysis (2000, p. 22), qualitative analysis approaches enabled the researcher to begin with an emergent holistic view of the data, and then begin to identify key threads, emerging patterns, trends and inconsistencies. The analysis process was accompanied by researcher reflection, learning, reading, and then returning to the empirical data, which saw the research progress in a non-linear, cyclical way. Throughout the study I collated and reviewed annotated participant notes and emails, maintained extensive researcher notes and kept a reflective journal as part of this process.

For each stage of data collection I first reviewed the data set as a whole, grouping comments based on issues raised to identify broad themes, and consider how they related to, challenged and/or informed the research questions that drove this study. They being;

- What are the possibilities and challenges for educational collaboration for social justice in this climate of neoliberal hegemony in education policy? and
- Which of these might form the basis for alternative perspectives and practices for education partnerships?

Table 3 presents the themes and sub-themes that were identified in the analysis of the roundtable data.

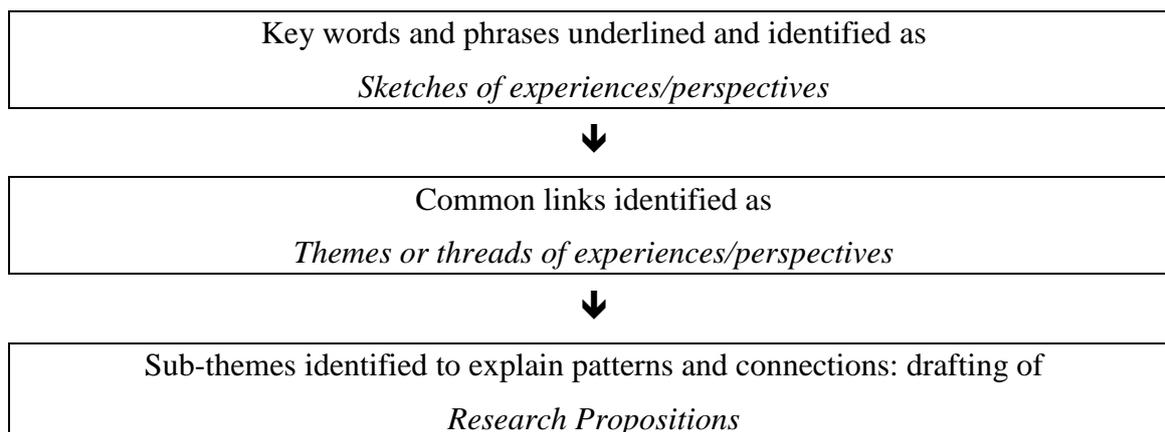
**Table 3 Initial themes from roundtables**

<b>Initial broad themes: implications for educational partnerships</b>			
Partnerships, neoliberal universities and schools: unresolvable tensions	Educational partnerships as neoliberal ideology	Problematising partnerships in countering neoliberal hegemony	Partnerships as resistance

The data were then grouped under these themes to identify sub-themes providing the next layer of understanding and enabling 'outliers' to also be identified. This process of

codification and thematic analysis drew on three key resources. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) describe initial and focused coding as a means to first identify emerging themes and patterns, and then move to synthesising and elaborating deeper meanings as connections are made in and across data sets. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest the usefulness of visually-clarifying matrices able to present summarised versions of the coded data, to assist in the development of interpretative commentary, and to strengthen the emerging research findings. And finally, the Collaborative Social Research methodology employed in Williams (2006) describes a process where the data generated are analysed “to identify key threads of experience, emerging patterns in the attitudes expressed and other key issues as illuminated” by the participants (p. 64-65), in this case identifying themes and sub-themes in educational partnerships for social justice and transformation.

### Figure 1. Sketches, Themes and Sub-themes



(Drawn from Williams, 2006 based on (Cherednichenko, Davies, Kruger, & O'Rourke, 2001)

Using this process each passage of transcribed text was analysed with key words and phrases identified as sketches of experience or perspective; which were then grouped or bundled based on patterns observed and recognised as threads of experience or perspective (themes); leading to the identification of further links and connections (sub-themes) and the possibility of initial research propositions being developed. The key difference between this and the earlier study (Williams, 2006) is that the data analysed here is largely conversational, involving many voices in dialogue. This means that there

were two aspects to the sketches captured and threads identified: the single voice comment and associated meaning; and the dialogical element where the interaction or exchange between two or more voices provided extra layers of meaning to be considered. The response to this can be evidenced in part through several instances in this thesis where the data are presented as a 'chunk' of conversation, in recognition that it is the exchange between participants and through the course of the dialogue that is of significance, and where the meaning is to be found.

The themes and sub-themes emerging from this process are presented below in Table 4.

**Table 4 Research themes and sub-themes**

<b>Themes and sub-themes: implications for educational partnerships</b>			
<b>Neoliberal universities, schools and partnerships: unresolvable tensions</b>	<b>Educational partnerships as neoliberal ideology</b>	<b>Problematizing partnerships in countering neoliberal hegemony</b>	
Contradictory motivations and competing interests in partnerships (Role of universities)	The Ideology of Social Inclusion	The importance of hope and hopefulness	Imagining authentic community building
Unchallenged hierarchies in Education (Role of universities)	Inclusion as control and conformity	The purpose of education: ideally envisioned	Relationships – humanising collaboration and education
Competition and individualism – anti-learning and anti-partnership	Social mobility versus learning	Identifying and defining needs in partnerships	Partnerships as resistance
Marketisation and corporatisation of education	Partnerships and the ‘disempowered subject’	Problematizing ‘community’	Democratic spaces and systemic change
<b>Views on the purpose of education</b>			
<b>Power and agency in education</b>			
<b>Chapter Four</b>		<b>Chapter Five</b>	

Such a process of thematic analysis saw some threads relate directly to research questions, and others emerge inductively, through an iterative process involving repeat sorting and collating to identify patterns and make connections. The process might be explained as an example of grounded theory (Cherednichenko et al., 2001; Hutchinson, 1990) as data were collected and analysed concurrently, through multiple cycles of reflection (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Miles and Huberman's (1994, pp. 262-276) suggested tactics for verifying conclusions was also employed, in particular checking for representativeness; checking for researcher effects; triangulation across sources and methods; looking for negative evidence; replicating a finding; and getting feedback from informants.

### **Theorising educational partnerships for social justice**

Consideration of the research propositions, drawing on both my own reflections and investigation and the PENA activists' contributions, lead to the development of two broad points of consideration in theorising the development of strategic perspectives for community driven, subversive partnerships. These two broad points of consideration provided a framework for achieving the stated objective of the thesis:

- Making a contribution to the development of a theoretical understanding of the partnerships agenda in education as shaped by Neoliberalism and as challenged by the growing crisis of the same, and
- exploring the nature of educational partnership initiatives as neoliberal policy to clarify and begin to theorise the opportunities for alternative practice and the development of a radical agenda capable of achieving genuine and fundamental change.

The approach taken provided a basis for theorising the realities and contradictions of educational partnerships, with the intention being to bring together an interconnected explanation of the various layers of influence, drawing on theory and existing research literature, in a way that might shed new light on the complex nature of educational collaboration as a socially situated phenomenon. This process revealed further links and trends across the data, and enabled critical connections to be made between very local and specific experiences and bigger, more global questions and themes. Concurrent to this process, any comments or issues that did not 'fit' the emerging patterns and

connections were considered as additional information, through which to further consider the research questions.

## **Role of the Researcher**

In an overarching sense, the role of the researcher in this study is considered in Gramscian (Gramsci, 1971) terms, where the traditional bourgeois hierarchies of knowledge and roles of researcher and researched are challenged and abandoned, in favour of a repositioned role as *organic intellectual*. Apple's (2011) critical education scholar/activist is also drawn upon to frame the interaction between researcher and participants, as well as in a more general sense in terms of the purpose, nature and expected outcomes of the study.

Others have written about the question of the researcher, particularly in qualitative research, justly raising questions around the potential for researcher assumptions and privilege in the traditional research paradigms to go unchallenged (Gitlin, 1990; Grundy, Robison, & Tomazos, 2001). The approach taken here, in striving to ensure this is avoided is to take a transparent stance politically, to act in a continually critically-reflexive manner, and to deliberately draw on a range of voices to generate knowledge around my research questions. In choosing to research an issue that I am deeply engaged in both as an individual and an academic, I also situate myself as co-participant, and recognise the importance of and value in learning from my participants. Almost all of the participants are known to me in one way or another, and this research has both directly and indirectly supported the range of activities, projects, work that we are involved in together, and will continue to be involved in. This demands a level of accountability as the research is explicitly related to, working and grappling with, questioning and informing our individual and collective practices, both presently and into the future. This is important, as it is a counter-example to what is still a prevalent feature of research (including educational research) where researchers come and go, without recourse, leaving participants feeling as though they have been acted upon, drawn from and/or otherwise passively given, in a process and not also gained or benefited from it.

From the outset this research has been driven by my own deep questioning of what it means to be a critical activist academic. Specifically, the evolving focus of this study has reflected ongoing attempts to situate my work in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the context of my political, ethical and social convictions. An elaborated reflection on my attempts in this has been included here as Appendix A, to assist in locating myself as researcher in the broader context of this study. Although tied up with my own sense of self, I believe that these questions hold relevance for all: those most oppressed and silenced in this unjust world, but also those progressive educators who struggle every day to find dignity and purpose in their work, knowing the world around them as they do. I considered it unacceptable to merely criticise, although much of what is said in this thesis is highly critical, including of ‘good work’. With criticism comes responsibility, and the point it seemed, was to be able to foster a criticality in the context of solidarity and struggle, rather than benign criticism and competition.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described the design and methods employed in this study, emphasising the philosophical, political and methodological consistency of approaches taken. The data generated, in all their layers of complexity, provided new insights into the actual reality of partnership in education presently, and highlighted a number of key provocations considered useful for any discussion around the possibilities of and for a more liberatory, collaborative practice in education as part of the broader struggle for a more equitable and just world.

## Chapter Four: Critiquing neoliberal partnerships in education

### Introduction

Chapters Four and Five present the findings of the roundtable conversations with teachers, parents, academics and community members.

Situated in the current economic, political and social context of education as outlined in Chapter Two, the perspectives of the roundtable participants provided a remarkably joined-up reflection on and basic critique of contemporary models and discourses of education and more specifically educational partnership activity. The commentaries presented fragments of a relatively articulated whole, demonstrating the importance of what Fals-Borda referred to as “folk” knowledge and its ‘scientific’ credentials (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991, pp. 8-9). They provide an opportunity to understand more deeply, how and why *collaboration in education* is so compromised, according to those working and experiencing it “on the ground”.

The data presented here cover a range of linked issues, common concerns and philosophical viewpoints that were consistently (and sometimes deeply) critical of the neoliberal commodification of education. These ‘fragments’ can, in fact, be considered a microscopic reflection of a grassroots community reaction and sometimes critique which has been otherwise marginalized in the literature around university-school-community partnership. They are of course, deeply relevant and important in any discussion of issues in and around collaboration in education and its potential as social justice. The roundtable conversations give a voice to community interpretations and aspirations which are mostly excluded by the dominant discourses in public administration and bureaucratically driven educational research, and provide fertile ground for growing a rounded critique and developing potential alternatives to neoliberal partnerships.

This chapter presents the participants’ views and thinking on the purpose of education under Neoliberalism, and then draws on the themes emerging from their exchanges to identify a number of unresolvable tensions in educational partnerships for social justice

in the context of Neoliberalism. Firstly, participants consider the barriers facing inter-sectoral collaboration in education exploring the contradictory motivations that drive such partnership activity; the problematic continued presence of hierarchies in education; the antagonistic relationship between learning and partnerships and a climate of individualism and competition; and the impact of the increasing corporatisation and marketisation of education. Secondly, a deeper layer of critique considers partnerships and the ‘social inclusion’ agenda, contrasting the aspirations of inclusion with the realities of social reproduction, and attempting to imagine more humanistic alternatives to the narrowly defined prize of ‘social mobility’. Lastly, participants consider questions of power and agency, reflecting on the possibilities for partnerships in an environment of widespread disempowerment, essentially reflecting on the individual and collective problem of the ‘disempowered subject’.

### **Explaining the Roundtables**

When I first considered the roundtable data collection method, I was focused on the exploration of alternative perspectives on partnerships in education for social justice. I had already formulated much of my critique of ‘partnerships’ and ‘engagement’ under neoliberal capitalism, and had developed and understood the need to think and learn more about an agenda for partnerships based on objectives and imperatives other than the ‘market.’ This necessitated learning with and from practitioners and activists, and explains the purposive sample, made up of people who self-identified as ‘in opposition to the neoliberal model of education’. The three groups of participants (twenty in total) came together with a common motivation, a common interest and an eagerness to unpack the responses they had each had to the introductory research statement I had provided them with, included below as Figure 2.

## Figure 2 Introductory Research Statement

*My research began looking at three University-Community Engagement programs in Australia, USA and Venezuela. The idea was to talk about and compare practices, perspectives and challenges of the educational partnership agenda in the context of neoliberal crisis. Very quickly my analysis developed into a sharp critique of the ever-narrowing view that educational success can and should only be measured in terms of private accumulation. In that context, partnerships and engagement were not only unlikely to succeed as meaningful and community-driven cooperation, rather they reflected and indeed arose out of the neoliberal drive for further privatisation, load-shifting and corporate-driven priorities.*

*I asked “What are the possibilities for achieving social justice outcomes through collaborative university-community educational initiatives in the immediate context of neoliberal hegemony in policy?” My research interest shifted to a more fundamental question around how and why universities might really partner with others to reimagine the notion of public good and how parents, teachers, community members and academics might genuinely work together in education to enable it. I’m interested in people’s experiences in formal partnerships, but also in their general experiences of working/living/being with others in educational frameworks. There is little room for shared debate and discussion. What do parents want from their kids’ schooling? What do teachers think is needed right now? What do academics know about any of it and what is their role if any? What if we imagined ideal collaboration across sectors from the point of view of what’s really needed?*

*The sample I have invited is purposive and in the first instance is based on a belief that participants agree with, in a broad sense, the above critique of the neoliberal agenda for education and the highlighted challenges for educational partnerships. Beyond that, participants have been chosen in the belief that they will bring challenging and creative ideas to the discussion and be willing and prepared to engage in a dialogue that seeks to move beyond the limited and inevitably flawed constraints of educational partnerships. The invited group is also broad, including teachers, parents, community members and academics. It is hoped that a dialogue, rather than individual interviews will allow and encourage participants to listen to each other, and consider their own views in light of the broader discussion.*

*Should you agree to participate I would very much appreciate it if you would consider the following four questions as prompts to*

*frame, at least initially, the discussion. These questions are aimed at exploring some of your views in regard to the issues involved in educational partnerships, as well as to stimulate conversation and thinking around a reimagining of education for public good.*

- 1. What do you see as the PURPOSE of education? As it stands and as you would imagine it ideally?*
- 2. Education policy is almost exclusively the terrain of government; how do you think that communities (in terms of locality and interests) could be engaged in educational reform and change?*
- 3. What do you think could be worthwhile objectives for communities to seek in and through educational change? What do you see as the connections between educational change and social change and improvement?*
- 4. What would an ideal partnership between educational institutions and community look like for you? What role do you see for the primary workers and users in education (teaching staff and students) in educational partnerships?*

Despite anticipating (correctly) that those invited to dialogue around these questions would have plenty to say, the process required some direction and focus to frame the discussion, at least initially. The sessions began with concise introductions from all participants, who were asked to speak briefly to their personal and educational backgrounds and how they saw themselves ‘fitting into’ the conversation. These introductions highlighted the fact that although a purposive sample with shared opposition to the neoliberal model of education, these were by no means homogenous groups. Amongst them were a wide range of political viewpoints, links of varying strength to formal educational settings, varied experience in informal educational/learning settings, activism experiences across a broad range of campaigns and issues and expanding over various decades, and engagement with schooling structures as parents and family members as well as educators.

The introductions were important in that they affirmed for the participants why they were there, gave them a sense of connectedness or ‘relatability’ to their fellow roundtable participants on the basis of shared experiences and perspectives, and piqued a further interest in hearing from each other about the questions being presented.

Based on my views on learning and the socially constructed character of knowledge, I knew that part of the ‘value’ in getting these people together, as opposed to interviewing them individually was the *dialogue between* them. In a neoliberal world, teachers, academics, parents and community members rarely (if ever) come together to talk about their shared, different and sometimes contrary perspectives on educational collaboration, and yet such dialogue is the foundation for any authentic and meaningful community – as opposed to corporate - perspective on education. Presently, any ‘community perspective’ offered through the mass media for example, is likely one which reflects the wholesale marketisation of society and the general commodification of social life and values that Neoliberalism has managed. By contrast, the notion of an authentic community voice, according to Freire, is rooted in grass roots dialogue:

“it is to the reality which mediates men [sic], and to the perception of that reality held by educators and people, that we must go to find the program content of education. The investigation of what I have termed the people’s “thematic universe” – the complex of their “generative themes” – inaugurates the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom. The methodology of that investigation must likewise be dialogical, affording the opportunity both to discover the generative themes and to stimulate people’s awareness in regard to these themes.

Consistent with the liberating purpose of dialogical education, the object of the investigation in most persons (as if they were anatomical fragments), but rather the thought-language with which men and women refer to reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found” (2000, p. 77-78).

In discussing the Freirean notion of dialogue as central to Freire’s pedagogical approach, Darder (2002b, p. 105) further explains the emphasis on the development of critical consciousness for all participants, and the centrality of solidarity to such a process:

Dialogue is collaborative, bringing participants’ focus on critical engagement of similar, differing, and contradictory views in order to understand the world together and forge collective social action in the interest of an emancipatory political vision....

Moreover, dialogue as both a political and pedagogical concept is fundamentally about cycles of action and reflection:

Dialogue provides a space to interrogate both our individual and collective actions; to consider the most effective approaches to both study and struggle; and to consider if there is something that we can do differently to improve our efforts to know and participate in our world (p.104).

Although by Freire’s measures these roundtables were undoubtedly limited as examples of dialogue given they were not part of ongoing pedagogical and social practice, but rather one-off gatherings, they nevertheless encompassed the fundamental principles outlined by Darder.

It is considered that the openness of the questions and prompts was of critical importance, as well as the fact that they were not driven by or constrained to any particular project or task, or limited in scope in any way. As opposed to a more evaluative framework, which may have inevitably narrowed the potential of responses, the prompts were deliberately open and exploratory. Participants were largely unfamiliar with each other and their ‘work’ contexts and as such there were none of the usual territorial and parochial tensions. These things combined, gave the discussions a more unguarded and collaborative feel. Interestingly, the participants demonstrated a habit of qualifying their statements with intended/attempted understanding of the others’ positions, for example parents reflecting on the lack of care they felt their kids

received from teachers, while acknowledging the increasing administrative and non-teaching burdens teachers presently face. Another example was teachers acknowledging the pressure that parents face to make the ‘right choices’ and ensure success for their kids, and recognising the potential of that to undermine their relationships with teachers and schools based on a lack of understanding of each other’s viewpoints and expectations.

As a means of data collection, the roundtables in and of themselves, provided considerable insight into the underlying challenges of ‘partnership’ in education in the absence of opportunity for ‘partners’ to genuinely dialogue and foster shared understanding. Essentially, the roundtable conversations themselves emerged as a form of ‘partnership’, where the explicitly anti-neoliberal views shared by the groups provided a common starting point, and provided an added dimension to the conversation beyond perhaps, what might have otherwise been something more of a complaint-based, rather than critical, conversation. As discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, it is important to reaffirm here the power of such dialogical spaces, in which people are brought together in conversation to authentically share, reflect and co-construct knowledge.

### **Thinking about the purposes of neoliberal education**

Underpinning this research project, as elaborated in the review of literature, is the question of the purpose of education and the fact that although considered fundamental to the present study, it was a question rarely asked in evaluations of educational partnership activity. In response to this, the first framing question put to participants, prompted them to share their views on the purpose of education, both as it currently stands and ideally. In response the groups spoke animatedly about a range of ways the current context of neoliberal hegemony clashed with their views and aspirations for education. In this way, the introductory question proved a useful choice in setting up the dynamic described above, one that emphasised the interest in dialogue and imagining/problematising alternatives. It also seemed to work well in terms of all participants feeling comfortable to quite confidently enter the conversation with comments and/or further questions. Beyond that the responses to the first question

proved a valuable starting point for the remaining research questions, providing rich insight into some of the actual, existing manifestations of the neoliberal context as it impacts on educational partnership activity, and the spaces (or lack thereof) for dialogue and cooperation in education. In and of themselves, such insights responded to an identified gap in the literature around partnerships in education, contributing rarely heard tales of the ‘lived reality’ ‘on the ground’, of those at ‘the coalface’ so to speak, and providing an often absent grass-roots perspective and analysis through which to consider current progressive perspectives, and questions, in education.

Generally ringing true with the critique of neoliberal education presented in Chapter Two, the roundtable participants reflected in different ways on the ever-increasing public pressure on teachers and schools to prepare students as enterprising, knowledgeable and competitive agents in the labour market (Down, 2009). Participants spoke critically about their impressions of and experiences in an education system driven by the commodification of learning and knowledge, one where the learner is reduced to a component in the formula of capital accumulation of market resources. Pablo, a secondary school teacher provided this attempt at summing up his views on this narrowing of the purpose of education.

*As it stands, more or less education is about getting a job, securing a job, or perhaps going to uni., to then get a job (Pablo).*

Early career academic Will’s comments that “...*how I see it, it seems very much job driven, so everything from primary school starts wide, and then becomes a more and more narrow goal... “*, that the system is “*very individualistic*” and about getting “*through the best schools, the best secondary schools... to optimise your chances to get into Uni., to get in to the best course, to get into Melbourne Uni... all to get that chance to get the best job... anything else sort of falls away*” also captured sentiments around the seemingly inevitable narrowness and alienation generated by the current curriculum imperatives and the disenfranchisement and disempowerment of students, whose success is dependent on performance in a highly competitive context. Community educator and parent Sue argued that “...*it’s completely commodified, and completely out to the market and education has become another commodity you can buy and sell.*”

However lengthy definitions or wholly-stated positions in the main, proved scarce, instead people's interest saw them move quickly beyond mere descriptors of values, expanding into a seemingly cathartic sharing of experiences of living, working and parenting in and around the neoliberal education model. Phil, ex teacher and principal and now teacher educator expressed a similar observation in a different way, suggesting that the education system presently is a case of "*the tail wagging the dog...*" with the increasingly narrow "outcome" at the top end of the system raised by Will and Pablo, driving all reforms below it. Secondary school teacher Anna used the phrase "*justifying someone else's agenda*" to capture this sense of imposed objectives from above and/or outside, and the lack of agency for teachers, let alone students. All of the schoolteacher participants expressed frustration around an overly bureaucratic and increasingly prescribed environment in schools, where 'administrivia' was eating into all space for flexibility and teacher or student-driven activities (see for example (Apple, 1986; Zipin & White, 2001). Academics, who it should be noted were of varying ages and hence had worked across multiple 'eras' in Higher Education, relayed their vexations at working in a system that was increasingly managerialist, tightly monitored and again overburdened with 'administrivia' (see for example (R. Winter & Sarros, 2001).

Heidi, a parent and practising Physiotherapist, drew on two key observations to capture her thoughts on the purpose of education. The first was a concern for her Prep-aged son, and her unwillingness to subject him to a system she saw likely to crush rather than foster his creativity. The second was an observation of the Physiotherapy students she worked with who appeared to her to consider their test scores and grade averages as more significant than relationships with patients and/or knowledge of their individual circumstances. Parent Rebecca, with four children aged six to eighteen, asked if education had lost its purpose as she counter posed the experiences of her eldest child with those of her youngest child, citing a more impersonal, less relationship focused system. All parents and community members lamented a crowded and overly prescribed school curriculum, and noted that there seemed less space to engage with school than ever before. Sophia commented on a general lack of openness and the fact that a "*cultural, participatory element seems to be missing in most organisations...*"

Despite the absence of clear definitions, the comments in each of the three roundtables came together to present a relatively coherent understanding of the neoliberal agenda in

education presented in Chapter Two, at least in terms of the first two features; the deepening of the privatisation and corporatisation agenda in education and the reduction of public funds, and the penetration of a culture of commodification, replacing the idea of education for public good, with education as entrepreneurship.

More explicit views on the political purpose of schooling under capitalism were also raised. Heather, ex-teacher now in an academic leadership role, suggested that “*at its worst, it is about maintaining the status quo.*” TAFE teacher Tania, and secondary school teacher and activist Tom raised questions of conformity and the role of education in the development of passive, integrated citizens. Other discussions focused on institutional structures, suggesting that habitual and now antiquated processes essentially “*morph into a purpose, rather than starting with a purpose*” (Heather) for education.

Several participants reflected on what they viewed as a fundamental disconnect between educational institutions and communities; both in terms of critique, noting the increasingly private rather than public influence in education; and in terms of imagining, calling for open doors and gates, increased community access to and control of educational sites and programs. These ideas and themes were constantly returned to throughout all three of the roundtables as participants looked for explanations and attempted to develop arguments for alternative perspectives on cooperation and partnership.

### **Neoliberal universities, schools and partnerships: unresolvable tensions**

Interestingly, despite the question of universities as partners being placed firmly up front in the invitation to participate in this study, and also despite the fact that staff of higher education institutions were present in each roundtable, the conversations overwhelmingly focused on school education, really only discussing universities when prompted or even pressed by the researcher. For the parents it might be easily explained that they would be primarily interested in their own children’s experiences. For the teachers, likewise, focusing on their places of employment, their vocation would seem

reasonable. For those connected with and/or working within Higher Education institutions this seemed to reflect a particularly grounded and grass roots perception of their work in the field of education more broadly, and the fact that most (not all) were either involved in teacher education, and therefore closely linked with schooling, or involved in equity and access programs working with secondary schools. Of course given their selection as part of the purposive sample for this study, they also viewed their own workplaces through a critical lens and with certain values and priorities. It could also be the case that the lack of discussion of higher education reflected the increasingly general presumption (culture of understanding) that post-secondary education is fundamentally about labour-market positioning and very minimally about learning. In other words, that the participants perhaps felt that any broader discussion on change and radical possibility needed to emphasise schooling, and this therefore framed most discussion across all sectors.

Nevertheless, when prompted the participants shared positive and negative experiences of universities attempting to ‘partner’ or ‘engage’ with schools and communities, both agreeing with and challenging each other’s perspectives and understandings. The four distinct but interconnected issues of exposing and understanding contradictory motivations and competing interests, recognizing unchallenged hierarchies in education, understanding competition and individualism and anti-learning, and the effects of an increased corporate influence on the sector, emerged as key overarching themes for universities in partnerships.

### **Contradictory motivations in partnerships**

Earlier in Chapter Two, an argument was made that in the absence of a clear socio-political analysis of the relationship between education and society, educational partnerships become confused at best, and mechanisms for deepening the penetration of neoliberal ideology and practices at worst. This was evidenced through the participants’ reflections on the contradictory motivations behind (and understanding and expectations of) much partnership and engagement activity they had experienced. When asked to comment explicitly on university-school-community initiatives they had been involved in, most had some positive examples and experiences to share, but the bulk of

discussion focused on unresolved tensions and the gap between expectations and outcomes, and/or between rhetoric and reality.

When initially prompted, the participants raised examples of what they saw as positive and successful activity between universities, schools, and communities, primarily (but not exclusively) focused around preservice teacher education and activities that might be broadly considered outreach. Participants working in universities described a range of programs that they had mostly been involved with themselves, and teachers and parents shared their perspectives on activities implemented in their workplaces and/or at/with their children's schools. One example involved preservice teachers at a regional university running homework clubs in some of the local schools recognized as 'disadvantaged'. The perceived value or benefit explained here by Will:

*“if kids aren't getting read to at home, well it gives them a chance to have that once a week for an hour... the idea is then to get people coming from the Uni. into these communities, so it's a bit of a two-way... so the [preservice teachers] get to learn that ... the kids and the families aren't 2-headed monsters after all, they're just people like us. At the same time that's helping develop [preservice teacher] skills and then of course their knowledge as they are learning to be teachers, they'll be able to use that...” (Will).*

Will's reflection here captures how he considers the 'partnership' to be valuable on the basis of an exchange which is mutually beneficial, with preservice teachers gaining important insight into and knowledge of local communities, and local children receiving extra support in reading, otherwise unavailable to them. Other examples the participants considered positive, included negotiated projects involving preservice teachers and local primary and secondary schools around a diversity of themes including innovative science teaching, sustainability, digital story writing with remote Indigenous communities and kitchen gardens. Again the descriptions emphasised the perception that there was mutual benefit for both the preservice teachers in terms of a rich, applied learning, and the schools in terms of enrichment of learning and added resources.

Mostly participants viewed these examples of 'partnerships' as positive, recognising them as (potentially) meeting a clearly identifiable local need, providing resources to communities who required them and also providing a more engaged, applied and socially conscious context for preservice teacher learning. However through subsequent discussions they also attempted to come to terms with why they were ultimately reticent

to characterise the partnerships they were involved in as uncategorically positive. Conversations moved quickly to a more critical discussion, focusing on specific limitations and challenges to intra-educational ‘partnering’, highlighting how much ‘partnering’ felt as though it constituted running in the opposite direction, that is was antagonistic to ‘core business’ and that contradictory motivations were at the heart of institutional decisions to ‘engage’ with ‘stakeholders’. Participants also provided examples of activities or programs labelled as ‘partnerships’ or ‘engagement’ that were perceived to demonstrate negative impacts of universities on schools and other communities/organisations.

In the context of such critical reflection, praise for positive connections and experiences was qualified with a generalised sense that such activity often felt and was tenuous, constituting relatively disparate and random “good stuff” that could be achieved in rare moments when the planets aligned. Fundamentally, the ongoing conversation dug much deeper into the relationship between educational institutions and their communities, raising issues and dilemmas that further problematised these ‘positives’ in partnerships.

### **Commodification of community**

In certain ways the participants were grappling with the fact that such basic resourcing as outlined in the examples of partnerships raised, might, on the other hand, be understood in terms of the privatisation of social (and educational) services, in much the same way as volunteering has become a substitute for government resources in a range of areas of public need. What Cammack (2006) refers to as the commodification of community, ultimately represents individual investment in the absence of sufficient public funds and backing. Moreover, such ‘partnership activity’ may be explained as a reflection of the neoliberal third-way emphasis on ‘social capital’ as a convenient one-size fits all solution to social problems, apportioning blame for social ills directly at the feet of unmanageable and disconnected (through their own apathy assumedly) individuals and communities, rather than the global structures of neoliberal capitalism. The logic of social capital is at the heart of neoliberal partnerships, but as Law and Mooney (2006) explain, it “focuses idealistically on a de-politicised, de-classed ‘civic’ consciousness” (p.264). The partnership activity described by the roundtable

participants here, with its emphasis on amelioration of issues and resource-sharing, but not on any notion of critical response to or action around the underlying needs of the ‘partners’ involved may be examples of what Law and Mooney refer to as a

...new political and social conformism with the aim of demobilising working-class organisations and activity. It encourages a fatalistic and conformist notion of social capital by confining voluntarism to safe, de-politicised channels. Hence part of its attraction for New Labour and the New Democrats has been its conservative emphasis on the norms of social integration while neglecting the basis of social disintegration in neo-liberal capitalism (2006, p.256).

This raises a paradoxical vision of partnerships that is likely to foster contradictory and confused motivations for both liberal and more progressive (even radical) aspirations for partnerships, in the absence of a clear critique of their origins in and role under ‘third-way’ Neoliberalism. Partnerships are generally presented as a positive and ‘inclusive’ organisational and political solution to many current social and educational issues, but in reality constitute part of a broader ideological and political framework that is antagonistic to authentic cooperative and community-driven outcomes. This is a significant point that continues to be raised and explored in the following two chapters as a fuller picture of neoliberal partnerships emerge.

### **Partnerships and Educational Research: Drivers and Purposes?**

A specific incongruity recognised as fundamentally affecting partnerships, was the question of neoliberal economic pressures driving educational research and its impact on the notion of ‘engaged scholarship’. Experienced academic Kim spoke directly about the challenges of ‘engagement’ in an environment where the “*pressure internally for research and publications*” rendered such activity professionally imprudent. The problem of community engagement or partnership not aligning with the ‘core business’ of universities, and having a negative impact on promotion opportunities for example, is a theme which has been widely taken up elsewhere (Bruckardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004; Buys & Bursnall, 2007, p. 74), and is often asserted as merely a matter of university processes and policies ‘catching up’. However as Callinicos (2006) argues, the priority for research under Neoliberalism is not some general pursuit of knowledge for the common good, but rather a very targeted harnessing of research to meet the needs of the economy, that is “to the logic of competition and profit” (p.15). The

explicit drive for “research impact” is inextricably linked with the channelling of funding and career benefits towards research that is deemed to be advancing the economic imperatives of capital (Marginson, 2000; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), and which is therefore likely for example, to see citation in a ‘top’ journal prioritised over a messy, local project to improve student engagement in the middle years. Although the language of community engagement and ‘engaged research’ is about ‘collective empowerment’ and mutual ‘benefit’, partnerships activity under Neoliberalism is fundamentally about promoting individual social mobility and market positioning in an individual sense, and part of a systematic approach of subordinating the university to not just long term but increasingly short term market imperatives.

Of course the effective roles of individuals and the exact impact they have in aggregate is not predetermined by market forces but rather is part of a dialectic of social practice: certain dynamics tending toward reproduction, while others tend toward a rupture from the old and a prefiguring of the possibility of the new. Partnerships are made up of real individuals, part of this dialectic in various ways, who will pursue a range of activities based on a range of aspirations. However Giroux sums up the academic environment in which such dynamics play out, in which they must be understood - one that is completely antagonistic to partnerships for public good:

Such academic downsizing has been legitimized through a notion of professionalism that bears little resemblance to its once stated emphasis on quality teaching, creative research, and public service. Professionalism now positions and rewards educators as narrow specialists, unencumbered by matters of ethics, power, and ideology. No longer concerned with important social issues, democratic values, or the crucial task of educating students about important historical, cultural, social, and theoretical traditions, corporate-inspired notions of professionalism now shift the emphasis from the quality of academic work to a crude emphasis on quantity, from creativity and critical dialogue in the classroom to standardization and rote learning, from supporting full-time tenured positions to constructing an increasing army of contract workers, and from emphasizing rigorous scholarship and engagement with public issues to the push for grant writing and external funding (H. A. Giroux, 2005b).

This raises a critical question for educational *partnerships*. Even where progressive academics working in higher education may feel as though they are able to ‘play the game’ and navigate the terrain of neoliberal education with principles intact, do those they seek to partner with (in schools and communities) also bring such an analysis to the situation? How do the researcher’s objectives relate to the ‘partner’s’ objectives? How

do they perceive this ‘tension’? The multiple narratives shared through the roundtable conversations enabled this question to be explored. Nathan, a parent, special education teacher and more recently a sessional teacher educator, described his time in universities and his time at his outer-suburban special development school as “two different worlds”. He described an experience where an academic from a metropolitan university, a behaviour management expert, had visited the school and met with teaching staff.

*I often come to [university] and I hear people talk about social justice as a concept and we sit in comfortable rooms and we talk about it, and it feels fantastic, and I often think there’s this school in [outer suburb], and there’s 200 kids and we don’t see universities, we don’t see partnerships.. and you know, an academic turned up last year and gave a talk like this, and I put that to him, and he said academics won’t come, he said they won’t come to schools, and I said oh! (Nathan)*

Nathan’s comment sparked a longer discussion amongst his roundtable about schools and universities and the concept of “two worlds” that is worth including here in full. It suggests that often in partnerships little is known about ‘the other’ setting and that there is ample room for confused expectations. Nathan paints a revealing picture that highlights the gap between partnerships rhetoric and reality as he discusses the professor’s visit to his school.

*I think people, in the community don’t understand also, the direction, so I didn’t understand until working in a university for two years that it’s not really about teaching students, as such, as the core business of universities. The core business of universities is research quantum and it’s publications and that sort of stuff. So as a sessional teacher, I thought being a teacher and being a university tutor were a similar thing, but they’re light years apart in terms of that reward system. So it’s great for sessionals, who like to – I like to teach – so I’ll get a job as a teacher, because real academics don’t want to teach. [And if you want to teach]... well I’m sorry you mustn’t be real. But smart academics don’t want to! You want to minimise... and you know I’m wearing the cynic’s hat, so I didn’t understand that.... (Nathan)*

*Yeah the first thing you do is buy yourself out of your teaching load (Sophia).*

*And I suppose being aware of that is really interesting. 5 years ago, I wouldn’t have thought about it. So a professor of education came to my school last year, and people just [Nathan motions that his colleagues acted impressed], you know they don’t want to ask a question, and when I put to him, you know he came and did a little session with each group, he was a behaviour management guru, and I put to him, I said look this is lovely but you know it’s a drop in thing, nothing will change in our community, could we look at ... some sort of partnership about, we’ve got some difficult problems here, you’re obviously interested, you’ve got a*

*million graduate students, and he said, and to the aghast of my colleagues, well you won't get any money! And I said, oh I wasn't asking for money, and he said well people won't do it. And I often see this...And this guy was a very erudite guy, and he said it's lovely of you to ask, but what do you mean, that's not the way the system works. Which is why I love working with autistics, 'cos autistic people can't work this out. This whole duality of the world about what we say and then about how the world actually works. And so I'm reasonably autistic, and so you turn to the guy and you think how can you actually say that? And so I suppose one of the things that we don't understand, we at schools don't understand this thing of the way universities work, and so what consequently happens, is when I go to school, I get from colleagues "oh you're going off to university for a couple of days with those wankers, you won't learn anything there", and that's what they say to our preservice teachers when they arrive. And then there's "oh bloody teachers, they think, they know everything". And so back on that thing of trust. How do we, and I'll find myself saying [to school colleagues] "oh there's some really good things happening at university..." (Nathan)*

*You're thinking is it part of the same system? You wouldn't think so (Michael).*

*Yeah, so the thing about listening and trust and bringing those people together, so that your work is valued, that swapping over is as valued as research quantum is as valued as being with students (Nathan).*

*And that's why often research is such an untrusted activity, because you don't have the relationship first and then you do the listening, you just come in, listen, supposedly, and then you go again, because you've collected your data, that's all you need (Sophia).*

The story of the special school in an outer-metropolitan suburb and a visiting Go8<sup>6</sup> university professor has a particular Hollywood feel, but it nevertheless captures just how difficult the realities of developing 'mutually beneficial' partnerships based on 'shared understanding' in neoliberal times are. Sophia adds to the conversation by making a link back to the aforementioned question of research imperatives, again highlighting the contradictory character of 'engaged' research under present conditions. Picking up on this point, another participant, Heather, who had recently moved into a high level academic administration position expressed her view around universities and schools seeing each other as just that, 'other', rather than 'partner'. While agreeing that negotiated collaboration and joint local action might improve relationships she explained the reasons why such activity is unlikely to be taken up by academics.

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<sup>6</sup> Go8 refers to *Group of 8*, the label given to the eight elite universities in Australia, generally speaking the oldest and most well established institutions in the Australian system (Gale & Parker, 2013, p. 10).

*... this idea of border crossing, I think is really important and I hear lots of teachers in schools saying exactly the sort of thing that you're saying [that teachers and academics need to collaborate more as peers rather than in existing hierarchical and uneven positions, even when in partnerships]. What we would have to do is dismantle a whole lot of rewards structures for a start, in universities, because as far as I can see they're one of the major impediments to doing such a thing. If you did such a thing then you wouldn't be able to, be rewarded, I use that term loosely, you know promotions all those sorts of things, in a university context. So that whole positioning and structures and relationships and so on that we have in universities, that's driven by resources and money and policies, is... (Heather)*

*Well it's a neoliberal framework isn't it, everything's just individualised and specialised, and we're one thing and you're not allowed to be more than one thing, 'cause that's called a conflict of interest, and ... (Michael)*

*That's exactly right (Heather).*

Heather added more insight to the unresolvable tension around the notion of 'engaged research' for academics. Unless efforts are re-concentrated away from 'playing the game better' and attempting to reconcile the tensions, towards a more critical and collective challenging of neoliberal priorities for research as anti-community, anti-partnership, such challenges will not be overcome.

### **Universities as civic leaders?**

Thinking about the potential for universities to assume a role of civic leader, of community builder/developer provoked many interesting cross-sectoral discussions amongst the roundtable participants. Rebecca, a highly engaged parent and community member, but in these conversations still ultimately approaching as an 'outsider', had slightly more optimistic and perhaps less realistic expectations of universities compared with many other participants, seeing them as an authoritative intervention against an unresponsive and/or conservative schooling system. She expressed frustration at what she saw as narrow, reductionist decisions being made by her children's school, based on local pressures around numbers, profile and funding, as she expressed it "attracting these people, from this postcode" and "getting bums on seats." Such comments in themselves reflect pressures on schools further explored later in this chapter. Rebecca

expressed her idea of a university's role as one of needing to come in and inform the debate, "*providing that information of... the latest research, the best approaches, the new pedagogy, to the principals of their local high schools to sort of wake them up! You know?!*" Her impression is that universities are full of "*higher intellectual*" conversations, that preservice teachers come to schools with wonderful new ideas, but that schools are places where by and large there is an absence of such discussion.

Indeed Rebecca's views sit neatly with the broader call for civic responsibility for universities, for universities to take seriously the task of regional development and improved wellbeing for their constituents, through the development and dissemination of new knowledge and expertise. However whereas the radical movements of the 1960s called for the conversion of the university into a centre for promoting social transformation, calls for its transformation under Neoliberalism aim to promote a more radical and efficient subservience to the financial and cultural exigencies of the market (Callinicos, 2006). As such, Rebecca's visions of a public university, virtuous and civic in mission, are increasingly at odds with objective reality. As is the case here, several individual and specific views vocalised by the participants tended to reflect hopes rather than express strategies for achieving the sort of partnership content imagined.

Rachel, a secondary school teacher, while agreeing with Rebecca that schools were often reluctant to change, and held to narrow accountabilities, volunteered a different perspective on external, authoritative 'experts' coming in or providing advice. She followed Rebecca with this narrative.

*Or maybe not even just to the Principals, it's to the community as well, because if the parents have ownership over that... 'cause what my school's really bad at, it became this mantra of evidence-based practice which sounds good, and so she was constantly, or the APs [Assistant Principals], 'cause we ended up with three of them, to get their increment they had to bring in reforms, so we had a reform every term that was, what you were talking about before which just meant that there was no space left to think, and so they'd bring in the thing and they'd say "research shows that...", and you'd say sorry can I see the research for that, and three weeks later you'd get the PowerPoint from the PD [professional development activity] they went to that had no references on it, and you know it was just some educational guru who was making money on the circuits. To me, for those things to be challenged and for teachers and communities to be equipped with research that shows that negotiated curriculum can work really well and can even achieve good VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] results, that sort of research, communities being empowered by that (Rachel).*

Rachel's experiences suggest that 'school intervention' is more likely to be fundamentally 'top-down', imposed and seen as irrelevant to staff and students. She infers that it is more about school leadership teams meeting 'key performance indicators' than actually responding to local needs and/or building on existing knowledge bases. Moreover, school staff are cynical about the profit making and career building nature of much of this type of 'presentation', with presenters seen as either directly making money as consultants, or benefiting in their careers through research outcomes achieved at the expense of schools. As the push to further privatise and commodify education continues, relationships between schools and other institutions (universities, private organisations, sporting clubs and other service providers) are more likely to be established in a fee-for-service framework. Also contributing to the tensions for partnerships is the fact that all of this is taking place in a generalised reduction of funding, so although schools still believe that universities are the 'cash-cows', universities are looking for 'partners' that bring external revenue with them to fund research.

### **Partnerships and community disempowerment**

Another conversation similarly discussing the role of universities and other 'interveners' in schools and communities in terms of 'partnerships' provoked Will to contribute a lengthy recount of his experiences in an outer-regional 'neighbourhood renewal' project, ostensibly locally-based action driven by community needs. The Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) program, according to the government is "... an approach that brings together the resources and ideas of residents, governments, businesses and community groups to tackle disadvantage in areas with concentrations of public housing."<sup>7</sup> Will, who was invited to participate as an academic member of the residents' committee given some research he was conducting in the area, was deeply disillusioned by the experience. Although making it clear that the project resulted in some material gains and some enhanced relationships, he questioned the 'partnership'

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/plans,-programs-and-projects/projects-and-initiatives/housing-and-accommodation/neighbourhood-renewal>. Obviously there is no space here for further consideration of the neighborhood renewal approach, for further analysis of the effectiveness or otherwise of the approach both here and internationally see for example (Angus, 2009) and (O'Hare, 2010).

given what he saw as limited and/or controlled or predetermined ‘consultation’, without space for genuinely expressed community needs and the effective abandonment of the community by the administration once the project cycle had come to an end. In Will’s words,

*...it got hijacked... , the community at one point wanted a new hall, sort of a meeting place in the community, a hub – no sorry, they didn’t want a hub, that’s what they got. [laughter] They wanted some space where they could hold community things, and a small room to store some youth stuff... that got sort of picked up and hijacked by a DHS and Education Department and they got this \$14million new school... which was all lovely, there’s sort of the school pods, and all that open plan learning, and then you’ve got the community wing, and it’s all very nice. But when I was out there, there was going to be a festival or something on, and they said “oh, you can’t put things on the wall, you’re not allowed to put things on the wall, because it will void the building insurance, you’ve got to use the proscribed hangers”, so you know, that reflected the attitude... so the community sort of came in, but it was all very... they didn’t see themselves in it, they didn’t recognise, this wasn’t them... and after \$14million of NR they left... and left the community to run things, volunteer based, with \$10,000 in the kitty, and just expected it to survive.... Yeah and of course it all sort of petered out and really had no impact. People talk about the employment agencies and others doing well out of NR, but really, it got some new fences done around, some new front fences around some of the public housing, but apart from that there was a bit of engagement with a core group, but that was it. The idea of education policy and communities, it’s listening, and letting go I suppose, some of the known ways we do this, and it’s asking how do you see, what do you see as the purpose of education, what do you want for your kids, and I suppose as a school saying what can we do for you, rather than what can you do for us (Will).*

Similar experiences to those described by Will have been documented elsewhere (Cardini, 2006; O’Hare, 2010) (arguments have also been made for much more empirical study of such partnerships), suggesting that many such community partnership approaches, although projecting notions such as *empowerment*, *capacity-building* and *sustainability*, are often more about intervention and disempowerment, the overall picture being one of communities acted *upon* – processed like ‘marketing inputs’. This disconnect between rhetoric and reality can be understood as an example of how Third-Way Neoliberalism’s commitment to ‘community’ as a new player in governance rings hollow as it simultaneously ignores the very real and worsening global political, social and economic factors that are undermining the actual bases of community strength (Scanlon, 2001). Additionally, unfolding in the context of a generalised ideological shift towards the individualisation of social problems, such partnerships invariably fall short of schematising communal solutions, and are the

provision of band aid solutions at best and the provision of a transmission belt for neoliberalisation at worst.

Similar themes were drawn out by Rachel, who on the back of the earlier conversation with Rebecca (and somewhat cautiously at first), raised another example, worth recounting here in full as a grassroots account of the tensions of university partnership activity, and the palpable sense of frustration around lessons not being learnt.

*The other thing, I don't know if this really answers your question [about experiences of university partnerships and engagement] ...I was volunteering the last few years... and the community group has been completely f\*\*ked over by [the university], like repeatedly, just so nastily... along the way I tried, and I've never got anything up. I tried contacting the region to talk about how [it] could be a resource with schools where you'd have an interface between university students, people doing PhD projects [onsite] and having students coming in and doing real world research, with university students, and that to me seemed really straight forward. And it runs, the woman who runs the education program there is terrific, and she runs some really good programs, but again it's not really supported, you know it's in some ways supported by the university, but there's so much potential for an interface between real world science and environmental management and the real issues of the [region], and the land degradation across the [region], and getting kids recognising that it's not just wasteland that they're living amongst, but it's you know [an] endangered [area], and you know, there's so much opportunity there! ... I've seen the issue as just the monolith of the university, that it can't engage with community, it's got on its charter or whatever... "engagement with the community", and then every time they disrespect us... and we're all there working really hard, we've brought in 100s of 1000s of dollars of community grants, actually managing the [site], the university is not managing... it's completely taken no responsibility... and the disrespect in that interaction with the community, at the same time as the university is going out there, trying to make partnerships, "we're making partnerships, but we're kicking you in the guts!" People who are actually doing lots of work... and we could have been such good advocates for the university, and I have become, you know I don't have an enormous amount of respect for the quality of all the work that goes on in parts of, and you know, it's going to sound terrible, I went to a higher tier university, and I probably have some prejudice against [the university], and the fact that most of our students end up going [there] I sort of hope they'll go to a better university, sorry Jo! ... sorry a few awkward things I'm saying there... because I had this relationship as part of the community, I was there, I was advocating, I was saying "oh no, we should promote and build up and not knock down, the way people do with schools as well, our local (university) and then they just exploit [us]... (Rachel)*

Both Rachel and Will's emotive but considered reflections suggest ways in which neoliberal partnerships can replicate and reproduce existing power relations, working from top to bottom, involving the latter only to disempower them in new and often

deeper ways. For both, the failed partnerships created a deep sense of offense, of being rejected and devalued. The affront was greater than had there been no partnership activity at all. The partnering was patronising, dismissive of community voices and ultimately ineffectual in its actual objectives. It is likely that both Rachel and Will could be considered more critical in their understanding of the contexts of education perhaps than the 'average' teacher or early career academic, and in the context of this study it is interesting to consider their responses to these partnerships, and the depth of their indignation at their failings. Others involved, viewing such activity with a less critical lens, are likely to be even more frustrated at the gap between the promise of the 'community empowerment' exercise and the actual outcomes, and assumedly left disempowered and less likely to pursue similar activities again.

Through self-reflection, Rachel qualified her thoughts in terms of the influence of her own values in judging different higher education institutions, but nevertheless her comments raise ideas about who partnering is for? Is it better suited to 'lower-tier' and 'regional' universities, but not elite institutions? Are the expectations different? We might expect that those elite institutions - whose connections with government policy-making can be intimate - are more likely to form partnerships as more or less direct extensions of neoliberal policy-making. Conversely, the more marginal institutions may find spaces that allow experimentation and even the possibility of subverting the dominant paradigm of partnerships policy. One story shared by Kim contradicts such an assumption.

Her story, about a Local Learning Communities research project she had developed as preservice teacher coursework, that was then narrowed to make way for nationally prescribed curriculum content, is also pertinent here. Describing a program that involved preservice teachers at a regional university, undertaking an ethnographic investigation of a local learning community, (i.e. local band, environmental action groups), Kim and other participants considered the ways in which such an approach to university and community could "*redefine what learning looked like and where it takes place.*" Despite her senior position and experience at the university, Kim expressed a complete sense of powerlessness in the decision to remove that program from the coursework, which was driven by externally-imposed curriculum developments.

Curriculum clearly has a definitive influence on the content of partnerships, contributing to the establishment of goals and priorities. What Kim and others' comments are highlighting here is the importance of a reconquering of curriculum by community, in the pre or non-market sense. It is argued here that only a knowledge (and relationships)-centred curriculum, rather than one based on market skills, can feed democratic partnerships.

### **Unchallenged hierarchies in education**

In educational research there is ample literature recognizing the power imbalance between universities and partners (for example schools and local community organisations) and reflecting on the historic borders/boundaries that can undermine attempts at 'authentic' collaboration (Bruckardt et al., 2004; Cherednichenko & Kruger, 2001b; Cobb & Rubin, 2006; Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Taylor, 2008; Zeichner, 2010). These issues were certainly reflected in the roundtable conversations, and almost presented as intractable. Comments such as one describing the university coming in from on high to "*intervene: read save*" (Rachel) schools, and another that "*academics are the **most** untrustworthy*" (Heather, her emphasis) as far as teachers are concerned, were made with humour, and to the echo of laughter, but were also presented as if they were so ingrained and so obvious, they didn't require much discussion. Such a depiction of current practice, particularly by those committed to collaboration and exchange, directly challenges the assumption that 'better partnering' through more respectful and more equal relationships is, in the broader context of neoliberal education, likely to be achieved, let alone be sustainable. This includes questions for the literature that explicitly draws out some of the challenges as a means to support improved relationships, but falls short of an actual critique of partnerships as neoliberal policy. Much of this sort of literature treats relationships as form only; neglecting the content of relationship, as determined by neoliberal exigencies. The participants comments here suggest that without a critical exploration of the content of the conversations and relationships that make up partnerships, it will remain difficult to imagine anything but constant acrimony and distrust.

Teacher participants spoke of their frustration at what they viewed as disrespectful intervention by universities in their schools, that ignored local knowledge and experience, and often involved the imposition of seemingly meaningless but demanding research programs.

The idea of the ‘pecking order’ in education, of hierarchies of knowledge continuing to be perceived and enacted, was brought up in other ways as well. Tania, an experienced TAFE teacher and community activist, who was undertaking a postgraduate teaching degree at the time of the roundtables, spoke of her frustration at the hierarchical nature of teaching and learning at her placement school. Teachers ranked higher than students, and she as PST was somewhere in the middle. These seemingly accepted power differentials troubled her as she developed her own identity as a secondary school teacher. Ultimately, such arrangements were viewed by Tania as undermining the possibility for any genuine collaboration and/or respect between teachers and students, rendering her unable to assume the role of professional while on placement – rather, seeing her as a passive apprentice despite her experience in other educational and community settings.

Rebecca spoke of her experiences as a parent with schools’ unwillingness to engage her in matters of curriculum or pedagogy as an equal, citing, with exasperation, one particular conversation she had with a secondary school principal.

*I have had a principal say to me, when I was trying to engage in her curriculum agenda, and for future outcomes, “do you think parents are interested in that kind of information?” (Rebecca)*

To Rebecca, the message from the schools is one of ‘these are not issues of concern to parents.’ Despite innumerable policy frameworks, reports and charters calling for strong school-family collaboration in education (see for example (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations Australian Government, n.d.; Epstein et al., 2002) the descriptions of reality evoke a very different image, with schools continuing to carefully and strictly define what are considered issues of relevance to parents and those which are not.

## Who has power?

These examples of hierarchical relationships were seen to reflect both the deeply anti-democratic nature of education and illustrate how unlikely genuinely collaborative teaching and learning activities were in such a climate, raising the question of how such hierarchies might be interrupted and challenged. Community activist and educator Michael suggested that universities were perfectly placed to “*break down the barriers*”, and facilitate conversations bringing the various ‘stakeholders’ together for shared and new understanding. Sophia, academic and parent, responded “*but the university doesn’t see itself as a facilitator!*” To which Michael replied, “*Right, well there you go, maybe that’s an issue. Who does, I guess?*” Such conversations highlight the real challenges underpinning attempts to achieve the seemingly benign call for *mutual benefit and understanding* in much of the literature on partnerships, but more importantly begin to shed light on the more pressing problem of disempowerment. Those working across different educational settings (let alone those *outside* formal institutions such as parents, community members etc.) may appear to have shared purposes but in reality have very different means of measuring or approaching the agreed task. In a context where all ‘partners’ feel empowered and able to articulate their individual standpoints this would simply be an organisational hurdle. In a climate where no one feels empowered to make decisions or take responsibility, such challenges become insurmountable.

Although higher education staff were viewed as being in a more powerful position by school personnel and the parents and community members present, the academics and HE workers present reflected on what they perceived as an increasingly hierarchical context in universities internally, and also their own sense of disempowerment. Those working in the sector sessionally or casually, spoke of the tenuous and insecure nature of their work and the lack of input they have to university decision making. Certainly a lack of job-security and autonomy through increased casualisation in both higher education and the schools system is likely to undermine or at the very least make difficult, partnership activity. These conversations also threw up larger questions about power in partnerships, for example thinking beyond simply better “leadership arrangements” to a consideration of what democratic arrangements might enable a variety of actors involved in each institution to be meaningfully included.

As argued earlier, the roundtables themselves presented a glimpse of a contrary, democratic practice. An important feature of the discussion was the genuinely inter-and-cross-sectoral dialogue between parents, teachers, academics and community activists. Despite their different backgrounds, roles, positions and sectors, there was a strong sense of openness, of collaboration, and a shared commitment to thinking through the question of socially just education from the various and different standpoints present. This dynamic clearly ran counter to the picture painted by the roundtable members in describing opportunities for partnerships - one of existing and deeply felt hierarchies in education, that rendered such experiences as the roundtable conversations rare or non-existent in the real world.

Ultimately, what the participants' experiences revealed, is an inability for those resisting the neoliberal agenda to find a common cause; buried instead in the singularity of their own concerns and struggles and unable to find the basis for a solidarity that might provide a starting point of turning resistance into a common base for the mobilisation and organisation of the 'educational community' against the real enemy.

### **Competition and individualism: 'anti-learning' and 'anti-partnership'**

Through complex conversations reflecting on the full spectrum of educational experience, from prep to higher education, the roundtable participants presented a rejection of the neoliberal model of learning as a commodified and narrowed individual pursuit. Parents rejected the reduction of their children to clients, measured and ranked at every stage, and were able to articulate the ways in which such an environment works against creativity and criticality. The increasingly competitive character of all learning and of the educational environment in general was a common concern of all the participants, captured succinctly by senior academic Heather.

*But the whole system sets people up in competition with each other, doesn't it? The students as well as teachers (Heather).*

Educators' comments revealed considerable thought around the links between formal curriculum, standardized testing and neoliberal logic, and critically, their own stance and role/s as educators within such a context. As Casey, Lozenski & McManimon (2013) note

...the increasing prevalence of “standardization” in education rhetoric along with continual tracking and punitive forms of assessment maintains the model of an educational factory with corporate logic, which perpetually reproduces unequal relations of power and provides economic worth to each student. For this system of relations to function properly, a critical mass of teachers must submit to neoliberal logic (p.47).

The roundtable discussions highlighted that many teachers do continue to resist the increased tendency toward standardisation, market-style measurement and regimentation; instead, maintaining a critique of such, even if based on “old-values” and as yet unfounded on any basis of new radical aspirations. Very politicised conversations around curriculum generally, drew on a range of examples to reflect more deeply on participants’ frustrations with the current Australian framework, cogitating the political, social and economic factors driving curriculum priorities. Questions around community and curriculum arose in all three roundtables, with participants, through dialogue with each other, seeking to draw out the tensions between a sense of *core public values* in education and localised content fundamentally shaped by communities independent of any external judgement. The UK context was raised as an interesting example.

*But you’ve got to have that space. And the UK has 30% local content in the curriculum, so that’s where that space is, and it’s anchored there, so that every teacher and every parent can start to fill that, with whatever knowledges they deem useful (Sophia).*

The UK example, noted as very positive, was contrasted with Kim’s reflection on the ways her attempts to make strong connections between local communities and her teacher education cohorts had been undermined through externally-imposed curriculum developments.

*Well that [action research unit involving working with and learning from local learning communities] has been put aside and is now only available in the early childhood course, because the history curriculum had to come in, so it’s that idea of curriculum coming in and bigger thinking questions and learning communities in an informal sense going out, and I’m very frustrated with all that (Kim).*

Several participants shared Kim’s frustration at their loss of independence and agency in terms of decision-making and the curriculum, reflected in Rachel’s comments that “things have changed very rapidly to decrease the autonomy of teachers, in the last few years”. This aligned with comments made more generally, suggesting a shift away from a situation with some proscriptive aspects and some teacher-directed or teacher-chosen

elements, to a situation with less and less space for anything other than an imposed and top-down curriculum. Time itself was very much seen as a casualty of an increasingly competitive, individualistic and quantified education system. Teacher and academic participants described in varying ways how little time there is to do *anything* purposeful in educational settings. The following two statements from parent Rebecca and teacher Jock bring particular attention to the ways in which a lack of time undermines relationships and the possibilities for collaboration in education.

*... through the whole concept of government having to be accountable, it's become a series of hoops that people have to jump through.... just in 10 years of being at one primary school, noticing that the staff had a capacity when I arrived, to be more than just a paid educator, they were a member of the family. I dropped my children off to people who had time to care and love them, and in that time it's not that the staff have changed, it's that their requirements have changed and so they no longer have the capacity, or the space or whatever to do those things that aren't measurable, because they're busy creating measures (Rebecca).*

Having four children attend the one primary school over a ten-year period, has enabled Rebecca to consider what has changed over that time in terms of opportunities to collaborate with teachers, and also in terms of the nature of student-teacher relationships. For her there seemed a clear connection between increased demands on teachers to 'measure' learning, and a loss in time for meaningful interaction that was (although 'unmeasurable') important to her as a parent. Such a picture correlates with Jock's expressed frustration at an overly proscribed and demanding curriculum, which leaves little space for learning relationships to develop let alone be nurtured.

*...over the last 5 years that I've been [teaching at this primary school], is very much the same, completely constricted more and more every year, so I get angrier and angrier every year, because I have no time, no space at all, and even with progressive stuff that's supposed to be building the thinking skills and the critical, you know you can be beaten over the head with all of that as well, rather than actually... because in the end education is all about having the time to think, and that's what's disappearing completely, and so in a sense it sort of connects to my idea about communities and families being involved, is that you still need that time and space, they need the time and space to be involved and you need the time and space where you can have relaxed learning, so where you can have parents coming in, or you can wander off and do this or that, and you have flexibility and you're not having to contemplate the legal ramifications of everything, and so on and so forth, so it's all about, in the end for me, the ability to breathe and to think, and to just be able to sit around and talk, and that has to be the foundation (Jock).*

These reflections from Jock and Rebecca demonstrate a robust commitment to strong relationships as underpinning meaningful educational experiences, and the understanding that such relationships take time to foster, nurture and maintain. The sentiment amongst the participants was clearly that little time for such relationships exists in the current neoliberal climate of competition and individualism.

### **Personal achievement versus cooperation**

The teachers and academics critiqued the hierarchical, increasingly standardised and competitive agenda in education (Saltman, 2000) as ‘anti-learning’. Their expressed frustrations at the standardised ‘high-stakes’ testing regime align closely with the arguments made by many in the literature that as a result of such testing, curriculum is being narrowed and learning is more likely to be teacher-centred and less cooperative in nature (Au, 2007). Lily, ex-teacher and current teacher-educator, but speaking as a parent in this instance, lamented what she saw as the impact of competitive structures on students and parents and their attitudes towards their and other people’s children. Her reflection on parents at the local primary school where her children attend, raises this issue within a broader consideration of change possibilities.

*...when I’m standing in the playground and get frustrated about the lack of possibility for educational reform with the demographic that I live amongst, [what] concerns me [is] that some of the other parents that I talk to, don’t want good things for other children. They just want it for their own child. And maybe the small circle of approved friends around their own child, some kids are excluded from that as well (Lily).*

Lily’s comments highlight her thinking about the impact of a testing and measurement regime that is increasingly pitting students against each other. Her observation is not inconsequential to notions of partnerships, and demonstrates the undermining of solidarity and collectivity amongst parents when the primary objective of education is seen to be individual advantage and prosperity as gained through personal achievement and opportunity. Other participants bemoaned the competition among schools for ‘good students’ and resources. Schoolteacher Patrick, working at a state secondary school in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne, described what he saw as the absurd need for schools to compete against one another to secure public funding, noting that

considerable time and money is drawn away from teaching and learning to support promotional activities.

*...and schools against each other, that's one of my frustrating things...the way that say public schools are funded on numbers and they're spending money on advertising to compete against the public school down the road! I mean that just seems bizarre! (Patrick)*

Despite the calls for schools to 'partner', to no longer act as 'silos' - and running counter to the concept of regional networks amongst schools, in terms of resource-sharing and other collaboration - Patrick's comments point out the inevitable consequences of a competitive funding environment in education. A recent activist campaign undertaken in Melbourne, calling for a boycott of the National Assessment Program (Literacy and Numeracy) (NAPLAN) standardised testing regime, gathered 'horrible histories' of NAPLAN from teachers and parents aimed at gathering a coal-face picture of the impacts of the tests in schools. One anecdote provided by a secondary school teacher told of a senior teacher at their school refusing to share teaching resources with a teacher at another local state school on the basis of competition for good NAPLAN results.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the sharpest example of the impact of the competitive environment on teachers is the ongoing local and international discussion around performance pay, raised by TAFE teacher Tania and others.

*...the government wants to propose ... for the EBA, they want to make teachers compete for some extra money, (performance pay)... (Tania)*

Despite a win against performance pay in the recent union-government negotiations, school teachers participating in these roundtables expressed how they felt disempowered by the cultural shift from 'moral incentives' in performance to 'material incentives' aimed at extracting performance improvements based on competition between teachers for limited financial rewards. Tania, in using the word 'compete' explained the likely divisiveness of such a system, making it clear that the intention is to undermine solidarity among teachers rather than foster cooperation, presenting another fundamental contradiction for partnering and collaboration in education. Moreover, such an approach has been heavily criticised internationally by those who view educational 'performance' as a complex matter, unlikely to be adequately 'measured' by

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<sup>8</sup> As provided on the Boycott Naplan Coalition website <http://www.boycottnaplan.net/node/17>

the narrow testing regimes suggested, and more related to systemic and institutional issues than individual ‘motivation’.

### **Competitiveness versus equity: fostering entrepreneurialism and ensuring docility**

In another conversation, Jim, a Higher Education equity worker and parent of primary and secondary aged children, described what he saw as a shift in the fundamental approach of equity and access programs in higher education, again reflecting the primacy of the logic of competition.

*I often think of the programs that we run at [my institution] which are quite good in and of themselves, but it's kind of moved with the new kind of equity funding to build aspirations, from a kind of model where you rescue the 'bright kids' who ended up in the wrong class, to growing a competitive cohort who will compete from behind, for tertiary spaces which aren't leading to any more jobs! (Jim)*

Jim is describing a situation that Down (2009) refers to as a “dominant market driven policy obsession with narrowly conceived and instrumentalist human capital approaches to schooling, in particular the emphasis on vocational education and training and the cultivation of enterprise culture” (p.60). In arguing for a non-market, humanistic alternative approach, Down exposes the inherent problem with the idea that “what is good for business is good for education and society” when he notes that “the youth labor market to which the advocates of Neoliberalism want to attach schools is rapidly disappearing” (p.54).

Furthermore, the competitive cohort Jim speaks about is precisely what was being criticised heavily by the parents in the roundtables. Concerned about the emphasis on individualism and competition, participants raised a number of things they viewed as missing from the curriculum, including a perceived lack of care, and lack of strong personal relationships between their kids and their teachers. They also added specific reflections about curiosity and passion being threatened rather than nurtured in the era of standardised assessment and competitive outcomes-focused education, and the ways in which their kids’ own identities were potentially swallowed up by a system driven by tests, numbers and rankings.

Importantly, the cross-sectoral representation of the roundtable participants enabled all-

too-often silenced TAFE perspectives to be brought into the conversation. A telling reflection from Tania on the current emphasis on *competencies* in the Vocational Education sector, revealed a particularly paternalistic and cynical manifestation of the narrowing of ‘outcomes’ (Wheelahan, 2007) and ‘dumbing down’ of education.

*...the way education is now, (it) is just a system that is perpetuating the values, that we, or at least some of us here, have been challenging, and many, many people before have been challenging, that school is to train you to respect this type of authority, or to train you to gain these skills that you will need in this capitalist system, and it generally doesn't offer you much more... we learn something, this is what we offer you and it may get you a job, you have this competency... and it's not like that, now that I teach at TAFE, it's all about the competencies, and you know how to sit properly, to reduce the risk of having back pain, "Tick! You can have the diploma!" And it's all framed in these boxes, and I guess it challenges, or the challenge of, yeah how do we integrate this local knowledge we have of places, in schools, in communities and workplaces as well, how do we integrate that to the system of education so we can offer something better than a qualification that maybe, you know how to sit, or you know how to turn on a computer... (Tania)*

Here as Tania considers what a TAFE degree offers students in reality, her comments highlight the ongoing relevance of the notion of ‘hidden curriculum’. Whereas an appreciation of the role of education in socialising future generations was commonly expressed, less clear was a common critique of the exactness – or key characteristics - of the 'hidden neoliberal curriculum' and the meaning of such for counter-strategies.

## **Marketisation and corporatisation of education**

Chapter Two provided a description of Neoliberalism in education, as in all policy areas, as fundamentally about marketization, a process (or in fact processes) which entails the end of universal programs and approaches, and the destruction of the post-war welfare model. Acceptance of this, however begrudgingly, has meant an end to the social democratic idea of "public good", with neoliberal regimes, often spearheaded by social democrats, using the language of equity and fairness to destroy what was labeled by them as ‘middle class welfare’ but in fact amounted to the end of the "public". In their discussions, the roundtable participants did spend some time reflecting on this question, with several remembering eras gone by when ‘equity’ programs in Australian schools supported and provided space for more democratic aspirations in education. More contemporary references considered the concrete fallout of increased marketization,

highlighting the unresolvable tensions between greater equity and increased marketisation in the (Bradley (Chair) et al., 2008) Review of Higher Education, the inequity of school funding, and how differences in school community resources levels impacted possibilities for ‘engagement’.

The following conversation between Rebecca and Sue, who have both been actively involved for several years in their children’s schools, foregrounds consideration of the marketisation of education and the implications for partnerships.

[Engagement is about] *resource equity as well, you know, in that a school like Queen St, or Kenthouse South or whatever that raises \$60,000 at their fete, compared to a school that raises \$1000... (Rebecca)*

*If it can have a fete at all! (Sue)*

*Yeah if it can, and then they become reliant on any one, anyone give us some money ‘cause we’ll take whatever, and then the resource imbalance just grows as “oh well, we’re going to the school with the resources”, and so I think in some sense that community engagement is reliant on some sort of more equitable resource distribution or something (Rebecca).*

The question of resourcing of schools in Australia is an important contemporary demonstration of the drivers of education policy and just how removed these are from democratic community driven priorities. Despite the hopes of Rebecca, Sue and many others, the 2011 review into school funding (Gonski (Chair) et al., 2011) has not resulted in any serious tackling of the structural underfunding of public education, with the real possibility that it may in fact be part of opening the door to the further marketisation of schooling. As Teese (2013, p. para. 4) noted in a more recent article “we risk emerging from the most thorough review of national school funding with an architecture of advantage and disadvantage that is even stronger than when we began”.

Participants also raised more explicit questions of how and why the neoliberal context was shaping decisions made around funding and expenditure, and how these issues interlinked with more general points the group was making, essentially attempting to make sense of the agenda of marketisation. Here senior academic Kim referred back to the question of research imperatives, making several points reflecting on the question of funding and possibilities for ‘engaged research’.

*...and that's obviously, that idea, it's the money that the government puts into education and how they put it in, and whether they should into which systems and whatever, and all of those sorts of questions, because the only other place to find the money to do what some of us need the time to think about is getting money from private business and I just think what's happened in the recent TAFE stuff from the Victorian Government is just amazingly against anything to do with, you know they've really only left the courses available that will be for employment and nothing for self-education at all (Kim).*

Kim is making two important points here. The first is about the scarcity of resources for research, and the fact that even researchers with an ethical opposition to private investment in, or control of research and knowledge are likely to have few other options for funding projects they consider important. Kim says this as a well-established, senior researcher, but it is even more likely to present as an 'unwinnable game' for early-career researchers and/or teachers without the 'track record' needed to attract limited public funding. Ironically, as all partnership activity under Neoliberalism takes place in a context of shrinking funding, there are often confused and unrealistic expectations around the money that certain 'partners' may bring; particularly the case for universities who are often still thought of and seen as having money. Although that is relatively true compared, for example, to schools, Kim's point explains how market imperatives dictate the decisions around spending for whatever existing resources there are in higher education.

The second point Kim makes refers to the recent (and more or less ongoing) cuts to TAFE funding in Victoria and NSW, which constitute a sharp example of the commercially driven decision making in education, and the narrowing of courses and curriculum to tailor for the most immediate and tangible of industry needs (Forward, 2013; Wheelahan, 2005).

In another contribution, Jim, an equity worker in higher education, spoke about his involvement in a number of 'partnerships' and engagement activities in his university which sought to 'widen participation' (Gale & Parker, 2013), that is, to improve the numbers of students from identified 'disadvantaged' groups attending the institution. He reflected on the positive and successful work he and his colleagues had built up with partner secondary schools, and in terms of admission and pathway opportunities. His experiences illuminated several tensions in the current contradictory landscape of

Australian higher education which on the one hand calls for increased access for marginalized and underrepresented cohorts, and on the other for deregulation and financial restructuring based on the bottom line. Jim spoke of his frustration at what he saw as legitimate, and less than legitimate concerns from academic staff towards his university enrolling larger groups of previously excluded students

*...most of the staff ...to be fair, have been fantastic, but there is a reaction along those lines of saying “oh my god, are we going to have to teach these types of people, they’re not suited”, and it focuses very much on that they didn’t get high enough ATAR scores. So there’s a really nasty dynamic going on in some areas there, which again has a legitimate aspect to it in that Higher Ed staff aren’t being resourced to teach properly, they’re just being shoved more and more students through. But I think it is important to break down those sort of things...  
(Jim)*

Jim was articulating what others have analysed in a more theoretical way, that the practices (let alone the broader rhetoric) of equity and access being attempted are inherently incompatible with the imperatives and characteristics of a climate of increased corporatisation and marketization of education, where as McWilliam (2002) notes ‘staff development’ is reduced to the cultivation of ‘enterprising worker’ attitudes. One example of the performative and bureaucratic environment McWilliam describes is the way in which many universities have shifted resources from faculties and colleges into centralised ‘teaching and learning support centres’, which are insufficiently connected to the local needs of particular areas, and therefore remain underutilised in most cases. Such cost cutting and the general culture of centralised managerialism serving to undermine the very practices needed to meet the broader equity goals Jim is referring to. Moreover, Jim’s comments evoked images of the “institutional ritualism” that de Jesus Soares (2013) has referred to, with the setting up of structures followed by sitting back and breathing a sigh of relief, increasingly taking the place of securing more staff and resources when and where required.

Jim’s thoughtful attempts at understanding the complexity of the situation are an example of what is likely to go unheard, as with most others working in the area (let alone partners) given the top-down culture, and decreased democracy of a managerialist university (Zipin & Brennan, 2003). The roundtable participants expressed interest in and ability to think through these tensions, eager to listen to each other as various ‘stakeholders’, and from the point of view of improving outcomes, but noted that there

is little to no space to raise constructive feedback or critique, let alone alternative perspectives.

Primary school teacher Jock, in another contribution, provided some important and relevant insights into his experiences of another catchphrase underpinning a significant amount of educational partnership activity: ‘corporate social responsibility’. Working at a small inner-west primary school with limited resources he described his thoughts on the ‘value’ of a ‘partnership’ with a local company that had been set up by someone else at the school, but handed to him and his senior class as a predetermined commitment.

*...there’s no point from my perspective... we have a company...a big sort of multinational project management type, financial corporate type organisation that comes in, and the way that it’s been factored into the school is as a leadership program in the 5/6 area, and they send people out once a fortnight and we do a leadership program. Previously it was quite painful and it was structured around them coming in and doing painful things, but we’ve got it to the stage now where if they turn up they turn up, and if they don’t they don’t and if they turn up we just say well we’re doing stuff so go and find somebody to talk to. And that’s the level of the engagement, but as it was set up originally, it was much more structured around... [Sue: it’s not a relationship]... no, well I can’t stand it. And it’s just sort of been dumped in my lap... and they just turn up and the people go away very happy and excited that they’ve hung out with some kids, and they thought it was amazing and blah blah blah, and we ignore them.... Well for those people, it’s a nice visit for them, and they see some amazing kids doing some cool stuff and the kids are doing some cool stuff, but the way I sort of rate it in terms of the value, is how many thousands of dollars did we get and what did they contribute towards... And they do - they’ll raise a few grand here to support somebody going somewhere or doing something or for some infrastructural stuff, but I have no choice... (Jock)*

Jock’s comments here raise a number of issues pertinent to this study. In the first instance, it is yet another example of a ‘partnership’ imposed from outside, or by others, in this case assumedly the principal of the school prior to Jock arriving. Partnerships between schools and business are widely promoted in Australia and elsewhere as the seemingly ‘indisputable’ benefits of linking education with business continue to be championed (Business-School Connections Roundtable, 2013; Department of Early Childhood and Early Development, 2010; Schools Connect Australia, 2013). It is interesting to note that while the partnership Jock is discussing was originally (ostensibly) set up on the basis that the employees of the corporation would provide leadership mentoring to the senior students in the school, in practice, it demonstrates significantly different ‘benefits’. From Jock’s point of view the employees personally

benefit from spending time with his students, and the school benefits from the sponsorship money that comes attached to the 'partnership'. According to the company's website, their view of benefit is different, with a section on corporate citizenship emphasising the delivering of aid, delivering 'marketable skill development' to disadvantaged communities, and an overall emphasis on the links between improved 'business outcomes' and improving 'the world.' The benevolence of the company is promoted, with the benefit for them seen as improved trustworthiness and a sort of nobility amongst their 'clients', rather than any learning from their partners or their communities. Jock's experiences provide a good example of what Cardini (2006) refers to as the mirage of 'cooperation', as partnership activity glosses over obvious and inherent contradictory motivations, in this case those of a globally operating, private profit pursuing company, contrasted with those of a small, public primary school in an ethnically and socially diverse area. Despite this, school-business partnerships are presented unquestionably as a 'win-win'.

Another participant, Phil, a teacher educator and former secondary school principal class member, gave a powerful account of his attempts to establish what he viewed as authentic assessment in one school, putting students and their parents in control of setting educational goals. In recounting the experience, he spoke of his frustration at the unwillingness of schools to spend money on (or indeed generally commit to) aspects of teaching and learning that are not immediately quantifiable, and/or aligned with regionally-set priorities, and yet spend money freely on for example, clerical assistants to call students' families when they are absent.

While much has been written about the marketisation and corporatisation of education at a macro level, much less has been captured in terms of on-the-ground experiences. The conversations engaged in as part of the roundtables provided important insights into the growing privatisation of influence and activity in schools and universities, on multiple levels, as participants problematised university-school-partnerships in that context. Their views added weight to the call for a fundamental rejection of the neoliberal agenda for education, recognising it as incompatible with social justice aspirations, and incompatible with practices of collaboration, dialogue and authentic democracy.

While such issues are raised in other literature on university-school-community partnerships and engagement, they are generally raised as challenges, pitfalls, dilemmas, as if the mentioning of them is enough to ensure people don't get caught out. Here, in contrast, these issues are presented as unresolvable tensions, aspects of partnerships that the participants felt were systemic, fundamental to the character of institutions as they presently exist and operate, and as such real blockers to partnership practice that seeks to bring about meaningful and radical change and progress. The roundtable participants' comments added weight to analyses of the incompatibility of the neoliberal university with partnership activity.

### **Educational Partnerships as Neoliberal Ideology**

Despite the diversity of sectors represented, the nature of the roundtable dialogue enabled participants to make useful connections between the different experiences and pressures facing educational partnership activity. This highly political approach saw them attempting to grapple with bigger over-arching concepts as they developed their critique of neoliberal partnerships and considered more deeply the question of the purpose of education. Going beyond mere description of the pressures on them, they consciously sought to develop clearer understandings of why and how such processes and tensions worked against their own held ideals of equity and inclusion.

Through such dialogue the actualities of partnerships as neoliberal ideology were highlighted and discussed. As participants shared stories and connected experiences and outcomes an acknowledgement of how so much of what happens in practical partnerships reinforces the existing ideological hegemony was emphasised: the promotion of dominant values and beliefs, the naturalising and universalising of said values and beliefs, the obfuscation of realities and simultaneous marginalisation of any alternative or counter ideas (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 1-31).

### **The ideology of Social Inclusion**

Both explicit and implicit discussion of the so-called *Social Inclusion Agenda* in education made it clear that it rang hollow for most participants and they attempted to

explain why. Sue, parent and community educator, labelled it “insidious” and suggested it was about “making *them* like *us*.” She raised the way schools in the Western region of Melbourne (statistically more likely to be serving low socio-economic status families, and culturally and ethnically diverse cohorts) are measured against how well they do or don’t compete against schools in the wealthier Eastern region of Melbourne, as another version of the ongoing “colonisation” process she was challenging through her NGO work in the Asia Pacific region.

*... the formal education system is not working for so many, there is an opportunity to make it actually quite different so instead of making the schools in the west more and more like those in the east, even though there’s three years difference between the outcomes of both, we’ve actually got an opportunity to do it a bit different here, that could make it have different outcomes and make it look and feel and be different which might be better for us all, ‘cause it ain’t actually workin’ for all of us in the east either. I find that a bit hopeful, and that’s some of the stuff that friends I’m working with in PNG, they’re really going through the decolonisation and how intrinsic that western, Australian-based education system that we exported, that doesn’t actually work very well for us, and now they’re struggling under the mantel of you know, a colonial system that’s really insidious, and the same with indigenous issues here, there is so much of making them more like us, and we just don’t get it, and it’s not embedded, and where people are at, or what they need, or transformative, ‘cause the systems only work for those of us who can afford it... (Sue)*

In this one contribution Sue grapples with a range of issues raised through the literature review. Fundamentally she is making the point that the education system as it stands, is not working for anyone. Although she is very much advocating change, she views current reforms taking place in the name of the social inclusion agenda as extensions of oppressive colonialist practices, with particularly powerful knowledges and positions imposed from above, and local and/or marginalised views sidelined. For Sue, who throughout her roundtable evokes the words and theories of Paulo Freire to support the points she makes, such practice only serves to deepen inequity and misses the opportunity for action and collaboration that is truly “*embedded... where people are at.. [about] what they need [and ] transformative*”. As she sees it, the social inclusion agenda, despite the rhetoric, is the opposite of the grassroots, community driven struggle approach she advocates, and rather about integration and conformity (Paulo Freire, 1970; Ponce, 1993). In short, the neoliberal partnerships agenda is viewed here as maintaining current privilege and disadvantage as opposed to challenging it.

Anna, secondary school teacher and activist, also explored the ways in which the social inclusion agenda impacts on schooling, reducing it to an essentially *reactionary* role. She explained how she sees its ostensible emphasis on informed parents and communities and on accountability, resulting in schools, teachers and students constantly having to justify their very existence based on measurements determined elsewhere and beyond their control.

*...students basically having to justify themselves and their own existences in schools, through all those assessments, and that schools, as the bigger picture are having to justify their existence as well, and [I see that] causing just as many, if not more problems. Because what I've observed at both the schools I've worked at, is there's kind of a sense of containment of students and what kind of programs can we provide that justify all the agendas of all the many and various groups that are continuously judging us, and having an extreme amount of influence, much more than they possibly should, and that even includes parents in positive and negative ways... the link between those things is really interesting and I'm kind of curious I suppose, which came first and which influence is bigger... and how is it possible to kind of drive a wedge and work on one, for instance less judgement or more open curriculum, when there's still this intense pressure for funding... your basic existence of providing education, even something that's considered not a business... I think that that's what makes it more and more challenging and even if there're teachers on the ground level who have all the right ideas, there's continuous pressure from so many different angles to be something else, so where do you start? (Anna)*

Anna's narrative provides a powerful description of the confusing and contradictory terrain of schools under Neoliberalism, as they are ultimately unable to reconcile meeting the needs of students and local communities, with externally imposed standards and requirements. Inevitable contradictions are revealed through her perception of 'successfully managing' students as something more like 'containment', a notion that came up several times in the context of broad discussions around social inclusion. In one conversation, Jim provided a sharp critique of the reproductionist role of education under capitalism (Paulo Freire, 1970; Ponce, 1993), provoking interesting discussion from Will and Anna, who reflected on the reality versus rhetoric of *social inclusion*.

*... people remember the old slogan "every child, every opportunity"<sup>9</sup>, and on the face of it, it kind of describes what you're talking about, in the public policy sphere, it basically is saying yes we do provide every child with every opportunity, and probably the dividing line for me in the equity stuff about schools... I was reading an article, actually it was Janet Albrechtson critiquing Chris Sarra, in The Australian [newspaper], but basically Julia Gillard has done a really good*

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1.1.1.1.1 <sup>9</sup> See (DEECD, 2008)

*job of saying this mantra of “there’re no excuses for disadvantaged children failing”, and so people like Chris Sarra are saying things like that, and other kind of ‘super principals’, who are really good educators and a whole lot of people are saying those kind of things, and that for me is the kind of dividing line between what education is at the moment and what it should be. Because there’s a good aspect of that, that it’s not a deficit model, it’s not assuming that kids who are indigenous, or from a low income background will fail, but on the other hand, it’s just totally disregarding the capacity of schools and teachers to deal with the actual facts of oppression. And you know I’m trying to popularise the O word instead of the D word...I think where we’re at in terms of the actual purpose of education... is that it is literally reproduction at the most basic level, so for the bottom 20% it’s kind of know your place, it’s quite literally you’re down at the bottom here, and that’s economic. I kind of get a bit frustrated with some of the language that, mainly the social services sector have tended to adopt, “oh the costs, the cost!”, well it doesn’t cost anything, 20% of the population are surplus, and the job of the education system is to regulate them, process them, and store them (Jim).*

*Contain them (Will).*

*Contain, yeah. If they’re useful at some point you can bring them out of the warehouse, but really they’re surplus. And the middle 60% it’s kind of compete for a better place, and the top 20% it’s choose your favourite place. If you can be bothered. And if you can’t, have a gap year, swan around, you know! So I think that really is where this kind of comes into that context, and working in the kind of equity space, this thing of no excuses, is really painful, it’s the cutting edge of that neoliberal agenda, and for the parents as well, it’s basically pushing that message to them, and setting them up against teachers in schools, and saying well ok, if a kid isn’t progressing at school, then it is the school’s fault, and then the school has to do something like change the blazer or the brand, or.... (Jim)*

*Yeah that’s it, and what I’m seeing at the moment, is our school and others around us, are absolutely doing their best to fulfil this “every child, every chance”, and the way they’re doing that is not even to contain, it’s to push out. I remember growing up at a similar school to where I’m teaching now, and we used to get all the kids that were kicked from the catholic school, or the private school, (and the idea of that happening at our school now is just absurd), it’s like well that’s where everyone ends up! And then even when all the tech schools were closed around us, that’s where everyone ended up, at our school. And you know, obviously good, bad and otherwise. But at our school at the moment, it’s almost like witch hunts, I mean as much as there’s celebration of students who are winning things and doing well, it’s like who’s got notes on this particular student and who can add to his case. So you know, they can be moved on as soon as possible. And it started off as sort of being announced, and then we found out, as well as the “key offenders”, who were announced, there’s a whole lot more who have gone out the back door, unnoticed, and then in order to up enrolments, we’re just sticking the new brand out there instead, and attracting our “market share” as it’s been pushed on most days (Anna).*

Jim, Anna and Will's conversation is worth including here in full as it draws out a number of key points the participants grappled with in the roundtables in terms of the rhetoric versus reality in educational equity discourse. Jim's attempt at framing the equity work of higher education as part of a 'big picture' suggests the ongoing relevance of the literature critiquing the reproductionist role of schooling under capitalism (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Ponce, 1993). His notion of the "surplus community" is similarly expressed by Funds of Knowledge advocates Zipin, Sellar and Hattam (2012, p. 184) as "abject community", not a deficit perspective but rather a critical understanding of those seen as "being ejected from normative social 'inclusions'" as they are deemed, both individually and collectively, to have failed to possess enough "entrepreneurial virtue" (Harvey, 2007, p. 65) to bring about their own success in the free market. Anna's comments provide revealing detail about how the promise of "every child, every opportunity" plays out in schools in reality, with the sifting and sorting of winners and losers still very much present, just 'managed' differently to meet 'inclusion' targets and objectives. Although Anna's description of containment and when that fails, ejection, directly contradicts the values of the "every child, every opportunity" framework (DEECD, 2008), it is still individual students, their families, and/or their teachers who are 'blamed' when things go wrong despite "every opportunity" being offered.

### **The 'opportunity' myth**

The above conversation brings into sharp relief the inherent contradiction between a system that talks about *social inclusion*, while asking schools, teachers and students to compete, be ranked against each other, and demonstrate quality on the basis of standardised, quantitative broad-brush measurement tools (Au, 2009). The numbers game, or the *game of opportunity* ultimately involves winners and losers and thus leaves actual people behind. The experiences and observations shared by Anna and others through the roundtables highlighted this unresolvable tension, and also some of the ideological confusion that it generates amongst those working in the system. It was explained that in some cases the ejection of students is seen as a benevolent feature of the 'social inclusion' agenda, in other words, it is better for students to find out earlier

rather than later that they don't have what it takes to positively impact the school's NAPLAN scores, enabling them to find more 'suitable' options. There is a disconnect between the values as expressed in the social inclusion language, and the values represented through the actual practices as schools clamour to 'compete'. Jim, Anna and Will's contributions here highlight the difficulties in imagining any idea of good and fulfilment not tied – via the liberal notion of opportunity – to the mechanisms and spirit of the market, and its narrowly defined measures of success. Put another way, social inclusion is dependent on acceptance of society's pre-existing determinations of aspirations, despite the rhetoric of 'individual pathways' and 'choice.' Such antagonisms inform 'partnering' from the outset, determining a logic of system integration, unless a conscious process of subversion is adopted. As Giroux (2003) notes, conscious subversion is unlikely in an increasingly corporatized education system where, "(g)iven the narrow nature of corporate concerns, it is not surprising that when matters of accountability become part of the language of school reform, they are divorced from broader considerations of social responsibility" (p.184).

Moreover, the conversations profile the idea of *Education for Public Good* as a clearly fraught concept, raising the question of the basis upon which educational 'communities' measure success. The picture being painted evokes at worst a deeply exclusive process, designed to privilege the already privileged at the expense of the excluded. At best it evokes a return to a more utilitarian approach suggesting that a framework of ensuring VCE and NAPLAN scores are raised, so that overall prestige, resources, and 'capacity' of the school 'community' are in turn raised. Either way the process involves the justification of casualties along the way. Fundamentally, the language and aspirations of the social inclusion agenda are at odds with reality, with students both proverbially and literally 'left behind'.

A key question left unraised by policy-makers but of fundamental importance to the roundtable participants, is whether higher test results equate with educational success in any case. Although absent from the policy discussion by and large, it is surely extremely pertinent when partnerships are evaluated and in fact devised with quantitative measures of success in mind.

Partnerships documentation and frameworks consistently talk about mutual understanding and interest, and are seen as integral to the broader social inclusion agenda, however the roundtable conversations elucidate how unlikely that is in a real sense given the current expectations on schools. The antagonisms inherent in the so-called Social Inclusion Agenda revealed by the participants, highlight the complexity of ‘competing interests’ in schools and communities, around the whole notion of ‘what kind of education we need’. They also revealed a generalised sense of strategic fuzziness, unable to imagine let alone describe clearly alternatives that are posed as whole rather than ameliorative measures.

### **Inclusion as control and conformity**

Much has been written explaining the fundamental role of capitalist schooling in ensuring that students are appropriately socialised to play the roles required by the ruling class at any given time (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, pp. 131-132), that is that education promises the development of a citizenry that is both economically and technically suitable and socio-politically and culturally fitting the capitalist system (Freire, 1970). Throughout their dialogue, the roundtable participants considered the implications of this for educational collaboration. Giroux (2001), Apple (1999), hooks (1994) and others have written extensively on the way that schools foster consent and conformity, describing the ways in which students are subjected to highly disciplinary, authoritarian and hierarchical environments, and treated to subjugation and powerlessness as “clients” (Freire, 19790). This is a point raised by parent Heidi, who at the time of the roundtables, had decided to home-school her prep-aged son rather than send him to the local state primary school.

*It’s funny... the biggest concern that people expressed to me when I say I’m choosing to home educate at the moment, was “but what about socialisation, you know, how is he going to learn how to conform?” [laughter] you know, he’s gotta learn that, one day he’s going to have to ... wear a uniform and go to work at this time and say yes to a boss! (Heidi)*

In this contribution, Heidi reflects with irony on the overtly acknowledged equation of socialisation with conformity, expressed by other parents of school-aged children. Her comments reflect a deep acceptance of the idea of the ‘good student’ and ‘good learning’ as that which prepares young people for the status quo, ensuring they ‘fit’ or

‘integrate’ successfully into existing social structures and roles. The parents expressed no issues with the fundamentally repressive function of education so sharply denounced by Freire (and others) in 1970. Heidi on the other hand counter posed learning to conform with schooling based on a deeper learning about one’s self and others, raising the differences between ‘achievement’ and ‘learning’, and questioning the kind of learning that comes through conforming to what is perceived as someone else’s agenda.

*... the purpose of schooling as learning to conform to those rules, to someone else’s agenda, having a teacher and you need to follow their agenda, and that really kind of concerns me... I look at my own education and think that I was a really good student and never really questioned anything... That’s what we have to learn.. and yeah I don’t really want that experience [for my son]... [for him] to be driven by somebody else for their agenda (Heidi).*

The idea of education as a form of social control, aimed at developing a conformist attitude in students, was discussed in all three roundtables, with Patrick describing schooling at its worst as “...sit down, shut up and learn...” Community activist Michael was equally damning. His critique also echoed Freire’s (1970) description of the banking model of education and the passive role for students within it, seeing the outcome as ‘submissive’ and ‘compliant’ citizens.

*In my more cynical moments I just want to describe the whole thing as glorified childcare, you know right up to the secondary level, it’s just get the kids out of the way, someone else can look after them so we can go to work and earn the money to buy the things that I don’t think we need...at the same time there’s this training for employees, that’s what it’s there for... factory fodder, it’s a worker production system, to put it that way, and at worst it’s a system for entrenching submission or compliant attitudes, because it takes creative young children who have got all sorts of curiosity, and it channels all that curiosity out of them... (Michael)*

Despite their own relative success and engagement with institutionalized education, the participants also reflected on their own deep sense of disempowerment, and this certainly underpinned the anti-authoritarian critique they engaged in. Schooling, in terms of both curriculum and teaching, was considered an area of professionally provided services, increasingly outside the control of teachers, let alone their ‘clients’, both parents and students. This is especially so as the public system seemed to provide no actual leverage for ‘outside’ involvement let alone influence. Similar inferences were made by those working in Higher Education, albeit with different emphases and tensions as the fully neoliberalised university is pursued.

Such a characterisation of education highlights the extent of the problems facing liberal views of educational partnerships presently, given the emphasis (in rhetoric at least) on active and informed participation, mutual benefit and decision-making and shared ownership. The participants' experiences across the system, in the main, made a lie of most of the official partnerships discourse, leaving aside the possibilities for more radical and transformative collaborative practice.

A particular emphasis for some participants was the ways in which this context fundamentally challenged, indeed blocked the development of positive student/teacher relationships, as well as student/student relationships and parent/school/teacher relationships. Tania raised questions of democracy and power while reflecting on her own experiences as a pre-service teacher and the experiences of her secondary students.

*I believe in democratic societies, and also in the role of challenging and changing what we understand that authority means, and ... about schools just reproducing the status quo, how do we understand this idea of authority and power from the school?... the teacher says "well there are different rules for adults and for students", and so how do we change that? A student who is growing up, is already understanding, or being forced to understand, that there is somebody who has power and authority and they just have to obey, and that's what we are learning. I learn that as well [as a pre-service teacher], that I have to shut up and sit, and learn and just speak when the teacher allowed me to, and we just keep doing that. So authority, and not that I don't believe that there is authority or governance, but how do we change that to a more inclusive and more respectful, and where people have a say (Tania).*

As well as providing another narrative on capitalist education's function of fostering conformity amongst students, Tania's comments draw out more deeply the ways such an undemocratic environment is unlikely to foster democratic tendencies amongst any of the participants (Apple & Beane, 1999). Although emphasising students and youth in this example, stakeholders who are rarely considered important 'partners' despite their obviously central roles in education, Tania's comments reveal serious implications for partnerships with socially just and inclusive aspirations and objectives.

The deepening penetration of neoliberal ideology has also shaped the social integrationist role of capitalist schooling in a way that has particular implications for partnerships with liberal let alone radical aspirations. Collaborative activity and partnerships are measured in terms of 'outcomes' where 'success' is narrowly

understood as a singularly described market-advantage, and ‘citizenship’ is understood as successful consumerism. As Giroux (2000, p. 85) argues

(t)he advocate of corporate culture no longer views public education in terms of its civic function; rather it is primarily a commercial venture in which the only form of citizenship available for young people is consumerism...reducing public education to the ideological imperatives of the corporate order works against the critical social demands of educating citizens to sustain and develop inclusive democratic identities, relations, and public spheres.

The participants discussed a range of specific issues such as timetabling and bells, school rules, TAFE and university compliance frameworks, non-negotiated curricula, punitive measures against ‘failure’ and/or ‘failure to comply’, and school uniforms, highlighting and exploring the ways education “stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (1970, p. 59). Tom illustrates this point in one contribution where he links school uniform with the broader culture of control in education.

*I think [the points about uniform] relate to the question of what is the purpose of the education system as it stands. I think a lot of the “barracks” nature or structure of a lot of schools, or tendency within probably all schools to have that aspect, very much relates to the purpose of education... in our society... we’re supposed to get trained to get a job, and one of the aspects of that is to get trained to obey orders basically. The obvious point is that the school structure is identical to the workplace structure, and the classroom structure - and there are a lot of exceptions as well, but where the teachers are encouraged to exercise absolute power in the same way that the boss has absolute power over employees, and the uniform is just part of that culture I suppose (Tom).*

Other participants agreed with Tom, drawing on analogies of schools as workplaces and students as workers, touching on issues raised by Agostinone-Wilson (2006) in her article on neoliberal schooling and the cultivation of “correct worker attitude.” In discussing the ideological imperatives of schooling in neoliberal times, Agostinone-Wilson suggests that

(w)hether promoting classroom management as a way to “team build” or steering students toward “self-regulation,” these efforts all work together to ultimately shape attitude and dispositions toward a capitalist ethos, embodied in the modern corporation (para.5).

Further discussion raised the notion that schools are like prisons, interesting in the context of broader public debate around the “schools to prison pipeline” particularly

discussed in the US (Advancement Project, Education Law Center - PA, FairTest, The Forum for Education and Democracy Juvenile Law Center, & NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2011), but globally important in the context of increased, and increasingly racialised (Alexander, 2012; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a) youth incarceration rates around the world.

Perhaps the main issue the participants were grappling with was the question of power, and the inherently undemocratic nature of most formal education under capitalism.

Although all of the practitioners readily acknowledged the need to organise and structure learning, they were under no illusions as to the underlying ideological message for students, and invoked Freire in pointing out that in terms of both *content* and *form*, the institution of capitalist education prevents students from developing the critical skills required to understand and name the world, in order to contribute positively to their and others' lives (Paulo Freire, 1970).

### **Social mobility versus learning**

This question of conformity and what Ponce (1993) refers to as the “integrationist” role of capitalist schooling came up consistently throughout the roundtables as integral to the critique of neoliberal education, but also in terms of the implications for practices which seek to bring about more socially just, equitable and holistic educational experiences. A number of questions and confusions arose as participants grappled with their (and others') notions of a ‘good outcome’ in education (and life) given the collective analysis of the current system they were developing. Although the ‘integrationist’ function of capitalist schooling was being challenged and rejected by the participants, the discussions reflected the challenges of envisioning a different sort of schooling in abstraction from community-wide organisation, social rebellion and the creative capacities and potential that these unleash. In this context, no clear (ideologically consistent) alternatives of ‘good outcomes’ are apparent.

This was drawn out as the participants explored the question of ‘learning’ versus ‘social mobility’, and in so doing, considered broader political and social implications such as the notion of meritocracy and the logic of ‘social capital’. For example, in the following

comment, teacher Rachel discusses the antagonism she sees between her radical view of ‘education as learning’ with many of her students’ parents’ views of what constitutes educational success.

*[in my area many] people have literally given everything up to come and get their kids a good education and a positive start and all they want is for their kids to succeed under capitalism. They don't want to transform capitalism, they don't want their kids to necessarily pursue their passions, they actually don't want their kids to pursue their passions, and so that's really problematic in that sense because the school was providing what the local community wanted, very much so and the kids would have left in droves if it were a less VCE orientated and authoritarian school (Rachel).*

Despite Rachel's careful and respectful attempts to consider the parents' perspectives and standpoint, her comment creates an image of an environment where there is little opportunity (in this case for teachers and parents) to genuinely understand, let alone appreciate each other's understanding of the notion of educational success. Her comments reveal another unresolved tension and raise the question of reconciliation between ‘education as learning’ and working class aspirations for ‘social mobility’. This tension reflects the dilemma that holistic and democratic views of schooling tend to sit comfortably with those families who already have the ‘social and cultural capital’ to guarantee social mobility; while for many working class families previously marginalised in socio-economic and educational terms, the idea of school as instrumental for social mobility is predominant. Two comments from Rebecca about her choice of school for her children also provide insight into these issues. The first reflects the contradictions faced within educational settings themselves, as they attempt to reconcile more open and progressive learning approaches in the junior and middle years of secondary school with the inevitable contrasting, highly proscribed and standardised VCE senior year.

*...we purposely chose schools that we thought developed whole people and developed thinking rather than ROTE learning... all of a sudden he's got to year 12 and he's gotta ROTE learn and he doesn't have any idea how to do it, any inclination to do it, so all of a sudden... after 11 years of being told this is how you research in depth, and this is really important not just to memorise it but to understand concepts, but well now you have to memorise 45 physics formulas and 35 maths methods formulas (Rebecca).*

The second comment reflects the changes now underway at that same school, as the shifting demographics of the area (gentrification), combined with increased pressures on

all schools to conform and perform on the basis of standardised testing regimes, influence the response to the aforementioned tensions. A uniform has been introduced where previously there was not one, innovative programs featuring group work, inquiry-driven project-based curriculum and a focus on community have been wound back, and a program targeting high achievers introduced. The logic is that of winning the newly arrived gentry through evidence of 'educational success'. Rebecca laments the way the promise of 'social mobility' has been placed firmly at the centre of decision-making.

*I chose the high school for my children, based on, it was fantastic, it had great ideology, it had great sort of sense of responsible children, we're not training monkeys, we're giving your child responsibility.. and then their numbers started dropping when the glamour school opened, and all that went out the window and we introduced one thing after the other, and every time I asked the principal or the staff "why are we introducing this?" "To attract people from this postcode". So whenever I would say what is the academic benefit, what is the learning benefit, what is the education benefit, "we're not interested in that, we're interested in the getting the bums on seat benefit", and so then we say "well will you review it", "yes we will", they never go back and review it, "oh there's five parents who like that program so we'll keep it even though it's destructive for the whole school..." (Rebecca)*

Rebecca's comments paint a vivid picture of the complexity facing school decision-making, and offer a glimpse into one local example of the competing perspectives around educational success and 'good outcomes'. A comment from Lily, parent, ex-teacher and now teacher educator, adds more to this picture, as she reflects on the motivations of her sister as a teacher, in communicating to the parents of her students.

*I think something that troubles me is that feeling that the school is for the parents and not the kids, that that's the client almost, to use that language... it makes me think of a conversation I had with my sister who is teaching in a primary school.. I put the idea of not doing graded assessment... and she said but what would you tell the parents? And I had that moment where I went oh, you're just doing it for the parents... it's always in the back of her mind, it's always about what am I going to tell and show the parents, which is a terrible pressure when she should be putting all her energy into those beautiful young people in front of her, which is hard, and I'm a parent too and you do want things... (Lily)*

These comments and the exchanges they provoked uncover how teachers and parents are both important ideologised subjects, responsible for the socio-cultural socialisation and assimilation of children in both varied and integral ways. Neoliberalism has exerted similar influences on both teachers and parents as 'ideological workers' but with sometimes different and even contradictory results. For teachers the pressure to produce

'entrepreneurial' learners is professionally enforced and increasingly controlled via regimes of testing and auditing. For families the same pressure comes up against growing time and money demands that are also associated with Neoliberalism, especially so in its crisis. On the other hand, teachers have a professional knowledge and collective traditions of struggle that can sometimes promote a resistance to neoliberal aims and culture in ways not possible for isolated families.

What Rebecca and Lily's comments assist to again make clear, is that any authentically democratic partnerships would need to start from a recognition of all of this, with a questioning of what parents and families want; what teachers aspire for; and what students dream of. The findings of this study capture just how unlikely it is in the present context, that such open, dialogical and constructive conversations would take place, whereby all participants in, for example a local primary or secondary school, would be able to fully understand, engage with and form opinions about decision-making about teaching and learning. Surely it is even less so that 'community' understanding of and interests in the tertiary sector might be fostered through such dialogue. Very little of the existing partnership activity as it is framed and conceived in a neoliberal context, seems likely to facilitate such a conversation. Yet the rhetoric underpinning so many partnerships is that they are precisely about local voices and community input, with schools (and communities) perceived as homogenous and unified entities, 'a partner' to be 'partnered' with another entity, such as a university.

Darder (2012) brings into focus both the way the integrationist role of capitalist schooling shapes and impacts on student and community 'aspirations' in education, as well as possible responses. She explains how

... within the context of education, whether we are conscious of it or not, teachers perpetuate values, beliefs, myths, and meanings. As such, education is a politicizing (or depoliticizing) institutional process. More often than not, it conditions students to ascribe to the dominant ideological norms and political assumptions of the prevailing social order. In addition, it socializes students to accept their prescribed role or place within that order—a role or place that historically has been determined for them in society, based on the political economy and sorted structures of oppression. Hence, schools are enmeshed in the political economy of the society and at its service. And, moreover, Freire contends that "The more we deny this political dimension of education, the more we assume the moral potential to blame the victims" (Paulo Freire & Macedo, 1998) and to perpetuate deficit myths about those who are seen as "other" (p. 3).

Darder's last point seems particularly pertinent in thinking through the issues that arise in the midst of partnership activity in the absence of the open, dialogical and constructive conversations being argued for here. Conversations that would lay the foundations for the kind of informed and politicised engagement with education that Darder is alluding to, but that rarely if ever occur. Conversations that would provide the space to overcome some of the frustrations raised in the roundtables, around the misconceptions and illusions inherent in neoliberal partnerships, including the lack of authentic understanding of each other's (partners') perspectives, the potential for 'deficit' thinking about 'community' voices, and the lack of capacity to make a case for your own views whoever you are. In short, the kinds of conversations that would foster a common visionary language from which to start, rather than ones that are limited to reflecting remnants of past possibilities and liberal idealisations, and with no connection to experiences of specific struggles and community organising.

Several comments from the roundtables revealed the ways in which the participants were thinking through this point, highlighting the need for and/or attempting to describe the kinds of conversations being considered. On two separate occasions Sophia raised observations about students' rejection of elements of the neoliberal agenda for education, without them being able to fully or even partially articulate why, or explain what they would prefer.

*When I did my digital storytelling project they were all low SES kids, and they talked about the dichotomy between social and academic education... [they] said well I can ... be in a school that supports [me socially]... it's around social belonging and feeling safe and being respected, but [then] being deprived of their academic knowledge, the high status knowledge that will get [me] that next job, or you know, any kind of access. And being baffled by the fact that they are made to choose (Sophia).*

*I see that kind of rejection in my students of some of those big ideologies that you just can't sell them anymore, it's just so blatantly obvious, yes you get a piece of paper and that makes you employable at best, but how does that help you in your journey to figure out the things that you want to master, so! (Sophia)*

Both of Sophia's comments bring home Darder's and indeed Freire's fundamental point about the need to first be able to understand and name the world, in order to participate in changing it. In other words, the need for liberatory practice in education that seeks to

uncover the structural and institutional practises that perpetuate educational injustice in order to consider the possibilities outside of and beyond them. The students' experiences as described by Sophia here demonstrate instead how alienating even progressive or 'ameliorative' practices can be when people are 'acted upon' rather than engaging, or being engaged in a dialogical process aimed at fully understanding such experiences in social and historic context. Instead students are kept busy chasing their piece of paper, and any awareness of the false promise it represents is relegated to frustration and disheartenment, rather than motivation and agency to rebel. That is of course if there is any awareness. Heidi's reflection on the attitudes she saw expressed in Physiotherapy students with whom she was working was one of several that lamented how successfully the system is selling the product of individual market advantage to students, for now.

*I'm involved in clinical education of student physios and I see the exact same thing happening at a university level, the students need to be assessed on 3 different criteria, and... are so stressed about what numbers they get on each criteria that they lose this opportunity to just be in it and learn, because they're so focused on the numbers. These are people that are going to be practising physios, with people, not robots, in a couple of years, and it really concerns me, and they're the same concerns I have about putting my own child into a school environment, about that assessment and focusing on that rather than the actual real engagement and learning (Heidi).*

Rebecca raised a related point, suggesting that universities had a role to play in "busting the myth" about educational success and attainment and the ostensible "good life". In her words, she suggested that universities had a civic duty to discredit the myths around hierarchies of attainment in education, and champion a broader, more holistic and community perspective on educational success. However as argued earlier, and as evidenced by both Sophia and Heidi's comments among others, the current university context is driven by imperatives running counter to such a task. While there was no appearance of a consistent and general critique and alternative through the roundtables, what did become clear was the aspiration for such: a grappling for re-inventing community, for a language of human-values contrary to their commodification by the market, and a spirit of discontent if not rebellion.

## Partnerships and the ‘disempowered subject’

Underpinning many of the themes already raised were fundamental issues of power and agency. Community activist Michael summed it up, suggesting that at the base of it all, is a sense that everyone in education feels disempowered in one way or another.

*I think if we ask people which institution is more powerful, the university or the school, most people would say the university, although that’s possibly not the experience of the people in the universities. That’s my experience of working with people across the education sector, is everyone feels like someone else has got the power, the people in the education department feel powerless to do any sort of planning as well (Michael).*

Teachers who had been in the system for some time felt that their autonomy as professionals had been increasingly eroded (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000) while those newer to the system didn’t expect to have much at all. This was discussed at a micro level in terms of heavily monitored and directed workload, but also at a macro level in terms of governance and ownership of schools and learning in general.

*I think that’s also about challenging the notion that we don’t own our own schools in communities, because, I think there’s a disconnect, that probably didn’t... people used to get that their taxes were paying for everything and therefore they own those things and they have some rights to say where they want money to be spent, and we don’t feel like we can set the agenda (Rachel).*

Rachel’s comments here refer to what she sees as a bigger issue in terms of notions of ‘the public’, with the very concept of public institutions being in public hands seemingly an antiquated idea, sidelined by the privatisation and corporatisation agenda of Neoliberalism.

In discussing such a situation, this feeling of disempowerment was recognised as a necessarily understood backdrop to broader dialogue around change and action (or practice) in education. Both the parents and the academics participating raised the question of teachers and change for example, questioning a perceived low level of politicisation or consciousness of teachers. Participating teachers, most if not all of whom identified as activists albeit in different ways, made similar observations about teachers being *change-resistant*, but made clear connections with a system that disempowers education workers and creates a “defensive” stance amongst teachers, as

opposed to an open and collaborative one. The inference was that even activist teachers under particular systemic conditions become resistant to change, and in some cases may even defend elements of the status quo as better than an alternative perceived as potentially worse. However such resistance is also likely in part, to reflect professional critique based on historical and contextual knowledge upon which the teachers make a conscious decision to reject change they know is likely to prove at best vacuous or ineffectual, or at worst destructive. In other words, and in thinking about collaboration for change in education, explanations for lack of progress arising from ‘failed’ partnership activity, although mostly perceived in terms of ‘poor partnering’ are just as likely to be about the lack of space for authentic practitioner knowledge and experience to impact decision-making, in a climate of decreased autonomy and lack of agency.

Participants provided very specific examples relating to this question, which assist to shed light on why and how some ‘partnering’ might be rejected and/or resisted. Secondary school teacher Rachel reflected on how one “change” process, the introduction of Literacy Consultants in her school, with Principal backing, had been a disempowering one for her and her fellow teachers.

*... we were part of the literacy consultants being pushed into schools in the western suburbs over the past few years, and... I knew about it because I had friends, parents, who were literacy consultants, so I knew how much they were getting paid, and we all knew, and watched them with eagle eyes as they sat doing their email on 100's of dollars an hour, and it was very much an attitude of them coming in and giving us the gift of the things that they had, with absolutely no sense of the good things we were already doing. So they'd come in and say right you've got to do literature circles, and it was like we do literature circles, we're going to do them in term 4, we're in the middle of something else, don't impose your ideas on us, we're already doing a good job and there was none of that sense of them valuing and just being with us and then seeing how they could intervene.... it was horrendous and so unhelpful, and so expensive, and we're all sitting there thinking we're just having to work harder, because you're being paid so much just to disrespect us and our practice and you know nothing about our students (Rachel).*

*Well welcome to Australia's aid program! I mean welcome to, that's the indigenous industry you know (Sue).*

*Yeah! (Rachel)*

*It's a very paternalistic model isn't it? (Pablo)*

*Oh it was horrendous and so unhelpful, and so expensive, and we're all sitting there thinking we're just having to work harder, because you're being paid so much just to disrespect us and our practice and you know nothing about our students. You're quite right, it's the same... (Rachel)*

Although a governmental initiative, and not involving any higher education institution, the particular narrative about literacy coaches in schools, in the context of the roundtable conversation, can be seen to be directed against intervention of many kinds in schools or communities, seen here to be disrespectful of local knowledge and experience (Darder & Yiamouyiannis, 2009). Rachel's comments reflect the experience of partnership participants who are not willing to simply "toe the line". Neoliberal partnerships are not void of content but rather *do* involve various actors but not without marginalising subversive voices. In this sense, neoliberal partnerships have a lot in common with the classical corporatist model. Numerous, more or less authoritarian, repressive and anti-democratic regimes have previously 'incorporated' community into the policy making process as a means of minimising and fragmenting opposition (Morck & Yeung, 2010).

These sorts of reflections from teachers were also important in the roundtable conversations in the way that they gave parents and community participants a different insight into how change works in schools. They also offered the parents a different perspective on academics, who the teachers saw as often sprouting the benefits of such roll-outs, without close enough contact to implementation to know how it impacts students and teachers in the schools.

The picture painted is one of people being "acted on" rather than acting. The group discussed the fundamental way in which schools see students as passive receivers, but also explored the ways in which all "stakeholders" are without agency in the system. The environment becomes one where those without agency are unlikely to invite others into democratic and inclusive decision making processes. This is clearly depicted through the following comment, which captures Rebecca's frustrations as a parent trying to be involved in issues such as curriculum and pedagogy.

*...principals also are very confronted by that, and try to assert at every opportunity to parents, "you are not in control of this school", and in fact I have*

*had a principal say to me, when I was trying to engage in her curriculum agenda, and for future outcomes, “do you think parents are interested in that kind of information?” And you go “maybe!” So you know in that sense, I think that even if you are engaged and trying, there are a number of institutional blockages there or a number of conceptual thinkings of principals who have to meet the criteria that the department sets them, going “I haven’t got time to flounder to your... whatever!” (Rebecca)*

Sue’s narrative which couples a generalised lack of consultation with parents around issues of educational importance, including when significant changes are being brought in, with the physical and legal ejection of a parent from the school grounds provides another palpable example of how disenfranchised even conscious, proactive parents can be made to feel in the schooling of their children.

*...last year...this principal brought in this amazing... it’s some really good pedagogy around teaching and learning, but she’s completely lost the relationships, so she’s not... it’s all about “the pedagogy says we should do it like this”, but there’s no “I’m going to have a conversation with you as a parent, or as part of our community about what this might mean, or how it looks.” It’s “I’m the expert, this is the evidence base”... you forget the building of the relationships, and so last year the school took out a restraining order against a parent for coming into the place, like, madness! I was at this conference with the Catholics around “Look Out Education”, and how to... and my school’s on the front page of The Age [newspaper] saying we’ve actually stopped a parent from walking in the gate, like what is going on!? How mad is that, that you actually... yes she was a difficult parent in a whole lot of ways but how bad are the relationships that you’ve got to take out an injunction, she couldn’t drop her kid off at the school, she had to drop her off outside the school gate, it was last year in Melbourne, that’s crazy (Sue).*

The bordered roles and relationships and existing hierarchies the participants are reflecting on here, have been extensively referred to in the literature on educational partnerships. In the main such literature has pointed to the establishment of key features of partnerships to overcome such confusion, existing power differentials and to foster productive collaborative relationships. However the data presented here suggest that the key features themselves (i.e. mutual benefit, shared vision, clarity of roles and responsibilities) are unlikely if not impossible in the neoliberal context to overcome the generalised sense of alienation, confusion and disempowerment expressed here by the various ‘partners’.

Freire employed the Marxian idea of “false consciousness” to refer to the alienated disposition of the social object, as distinct to the social subject, who by acting to challenge social structures becomes truly aware and open to learning (Paulo Freire, 1970, pp. 72-75). Conversely, partnerships not based on such active subjects will invariably be reduced to reinforcing the alienation of the social object. It follows that unless the partnerships themselves are developed on the basis of a critical consciousness around determinant factors, and moreover act to work against such structures and institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge and power (competition), they are not likely to meet the set objectives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which the Roundtable conversations generated critical and complex dialogue around ‘life at the coalface’ of the neoliberal education agenda, and the implications for collaboration for change. The multi-sectoral exchanges of experience and perspective, created space, and laid the foundations for, a critique of partnerships and engagement largely absent from the literature. That such voices are largely missing from current knowledge bases, reflects the essentially straight-jacketed, in fact ‘tokenistic’, place that community voices have in neoliberal partnerships.

The neoliberal model for education and specifically the corporatist approach of neoliberal educational partnerships, establish frameworks where conversations have predetermined or at the very least extremely limited conclusions. Such an approach draws community partners in to what might best be characterised as “show” partnerships rather than as authentic ones. Participants can express views but only to a limited range of questions; they can put forward propositions but only implement the “realistic” ones; they can protest directions but only be heard if they remain loyal to the process. In brief, partnerships become a form of incorporating dissent and disquiet into the policy frameworks of Neoliberalism, and in this sense, represent a form of corporatism and are essentially anti-democratic.

The approach taken here has countered such a corporatist model. Through opening up the dialogue as a fundamental re-think and re-imagining of the underlying assumptions

and characteristics of education, participants have offered a number of critical and unresolvable tensions for neoliberal educational partnerships. They explained and provided examples of the different but interconnected ways that Neoliberalism impacts on the various actors in education, resulting in contradictory and antagonistic motivations and expectations for partnerships. They reflected on the particular ways Neoliberalism has reinforced existing hierarchies and divisions in education despite the macro partnership agenda of ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘shared interest’, and shed new light on the antagonistic relationship between learning and partnerships and a climate of individualism, competition and marketisation.

Ultimately, the data highlighted the myriad - but connected - tensions that remain unresolvable in the framework of partnerships generated by, and in the interests of, expanding and refining, the neoliberal model. What emerged as the glue connecting these tensions was not some clear, conscious and persistently pursued policy agenda but rather ways in which the "ideology of neoliberalism" drives and motivates ‘partnership’ agendas.

The need for counter aspirations to the neoliberal model of education as private accumulation was highlighted, as participants considered the hidden agenda of ‘social inclusion’ and the incompatibility of the narrowly conceived concept of ‘social mobility’ to their much broader visions of empowerment and justice. Demonstrating both solidarity and optimism, the participants also considered questions of power and agency, reflecting on the possibilities for partnerships in an environment of widespread disempowerment, essentially reflecting on the individual and collective problem of the ‘disempowered subject’. Through their exchanges they shed light on the local implications of global policy frameworks and raised important questions and challenges for those committed to educational and social justice.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the data presented in this chapter, although revealing strong themes and recurring ideas, is in its totality, necessarily eclectic. It is suggested that this is an inevitable consequence of the lack of any meta-narrative – or more precisely, of any meta-struggle that could provide a realistic basis for such. Any idea that the problem of partnerships, conceived of as a transformative practice, could possibly arise from dialogue and critique alone is entirely academic (Freire, 1970). Only

a narrative that emerges from real struggle against neoliberal education could provide a real vision of transformative partnerships, which is precisely what is explored further in the next chapters.

## Chapter Five: Problematising partnerships in countering neoliberal hegemony

### Introduction

Chapter Four provided a grass-roots perspective on working in education under Neoliberalism, painting a picture which directly countered many of the underlying assumptions of the government policy-driven partnerships agenda in education. A number of unresolvable tensions in neoliberal educational partnerships were identified, and an initial analysis of their ideological underpinnings presented. In this chapter the focus shifts to the question of what we might do in the face of such an antagonistic environment, and how activists in education might view the opportunities and challenges presented in terms of thinking of alternative counter-hegemonic practice.

The focus here is on the participants' own set of goals for education, through engagement in collective critique of what it means to try to "do social justice" practice in education under Neoliberalism. Asked to imagine 'ideal' partnerships and/or collaboration in education that aligned with their values and hopes for education (understood as the symbiotic construction of knowledge and public good), they reflected on ways in which they had been able to find and carve out space for counter-hegemonic practices, both as individuals in the system and through collaboration, with implicit and explicit relevance for partnerships in education. They reflected on what they view as possible, necessary, and the blockers and challenges they had encountered, discussing questions of agency and power in their own struggles to enact their values and aspirations for education. They considered the how and why of enacting a critical pedagogy that seeks to empower 'partners' to understand in order to change, the world, rather than at best 'include' them in an existing, deeply unjust system.

Through these conversations a number of questions about educational activism emerged, revealing a need to further explore the connections between local educational practice and broad political and social change. Essentially the conversations reflected the contradictory dynamics of 'resistance', and the difficulties of moving from resistance to visions and alternative practices, enabling an extra layer of insight into the question of alternative and critical educational partnership activity to be explored.

## **Questioning the status quo of partnerships**

In this chapter the participants reflect specifically on the challenges of ‘partnering’ and ‘engaging’ in, across and between sectors in education, and with communities and institutions. In the process they problematised such collaborations from the point of view of social justice and empowerment. Building on the descriptive critique presented in Chapter Four, this chapter considers participants’ experiences, questions and interventions in educational collaborations, in the framework of the potentialities and challenges of developing a counter-hegemonic practice guided by struggle and solidarity, and against neoliberal individualism and anti-collectivism. As part of this, the specific problems of developing Freire’s (2005) ‘ideological workers’ and Gramsci’s (1971) ‘organic intellectuals’ are reflected, and considered here as a necessary though not sufficient precondition in informing a counter-hegemonic partnership practice. In foregrounding the data presented in this chapter, it is first useful to return to a number of basic theoretical arguments made in Chapter Two.

Both in Australia and elsewhere, there is no shortage of critical insight and debate when it comes to our education systems, with three decades of neoliberal reforms having given rise to extensive discussion and a plethora of reviews and inquiries. In the context of a particularly forensic global interrogation, these debates occur within, and hence fundamentally reflect, the hegemonic grip of neoliberal economic and political thinking. Since the very beginning of Neoliberalism, education has presented itself as an inviting terrain, both in terms of the economic pursuit of lowering public spending and maximising efficiency in labour reproduction, as well as in developing the preponderance of the ideological agenda of neoconservatism (Hill, 2006).

Any discussion of the potentiality and actuality of a post-neoliberal agenda needs to begin with a clear understanding of the main lines of development of neoliberal education reform. Outlined in more detail in Chapter Two, and reflected upon by roundtable participants in Chapter Four, a strong argument can be made that Neoliberalism in education has involved at least three key policy elements:

1. Deep privatisation and re-allocation of funds away from the universal programs that made up the access and opportunity centred approach typical of welfare capitalism's education policies (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Torche, 2005);
2. The planned and deliberate generalisation of a culture of commodification aimed at changing community attitudes to education, eroding the idea of education as a common good grounded in humanist principles and replacing it with education as 'entrepreneurship' (Beckmann et al., 2009; Bullen et al., 2004);
3. The development of a culture of control and regimentation in schooling and education generally, aimed at reproducing labour in the image of Neoliberalism, with choice reduced to consumption; and congruent with the general development of the 'strong state' regime of Neoliberalism (Gamble, 1979).

With that analytical framework, it follows that the starting point of any post-neoliberal agenda in education or any other domain, is necessarily resistance (Anyon, 2006; Edmondson & D'Urso, 2007). Of this there has been and continue to be many examples. In recent years, in Chile (Cabalin, 2012), Quebec (Ayotte-Thompson & Freeman, 2012) and elsewhere we have seen significant movements of resistance to the reform agenda of Neoliberalism in education. Each of these movements, brings into sharp relief the three key policy elements of neoliberal education; perhaps best summed up by one of the most popular slogans of the Chilean student-education movement: 'Fin al lucro en la educacion, nuestros suenos no les pertenecen' ('End profit in education, you do not own our dreams').

Learning from and with these movements across the globe is and will continue to be a critical element of developing alternatives to neoliberal education, as the actual potentialities and practices of forms of resistance are tested out, implemented and then theorised; forms of resistance that simultaneously critique and reject the present system and offer alternative visions. The three key policy elements of Neoliberalism as outlined, suggest such alternatives need to be based broadly on public ownership, and democratic control and development of education. Education that is truly capable of meeting the public good needs to be conceived of in non-capitalist, socialised and collectivist terms.

These sites of contestation and the broadly identified themes and questions behind them were explored as the roundtable participants in this study considered the potential for partnering and collaboration in education for public good. All of the participants, selected on the basis of a general, critical opposition to Neoliberalism, shared an interest in education as a life experience to be enjoyed, celebrated, valued in and of itself, and part of the process of community and cultural enrichment. In short, views of education that are at direct odds with the imperatives of the neoliberal education agenda.

### **The importance of hope and hopefulness**

Another feature of the data resulting from the nature of the roundtable dialogue approach, and something that underpinned the imagining of alternatives, was the way participants couched their critiques of capitalist education in a manner that also offered (an albeit mostly guarded) sense of optimism about alternatives and opposition. Each of the three groups reflected a shared sense of importance of *keeping the faith*, and of always steeling themselves and each other against the tide. The sentiment suggested a remembrance of fallen comrades, those educationalists burned by the system, lost to despair or demoralisation and so on, and the importance of continuing the fight and honouring their legacy.

In many ways the conversations reflected Giroux's "educated hope" (H. Giroux, 2002), with the participants demonstrating a commitment to be both critical and visionary, simultaneously engaging in a pedagogical dialogue aimed at unmasking the realities of education under capitalism, and problematising the possibilities for social transformation (H. A. Giroux, 2012). At the same time, there seemed a noticeable difference in this sense between those participants who had been 'in education' for several decades and were able to reflect back on more collegial and collective experiences, and younger participants who seemed somewhat less able to *imagine* such practice. This was particularly the case for Bruce with his anecdotes of progressive education activity in the 70s, and the opportunities to 'make a difference' to his schools' communities, shaping his political worldview as much as other, broader political activity, for example the anti-Vietnam war moratoriums and the threat of conscription.

Despite a mixed and often limited positive involvement in progressive educational activity (let alone broader political activity or struggle) an overall tone of ‘this is hard work right now’ throughout the three roundtables was balanced with an apparent concern to maintain a certain optimism, and to look for possibilities for change. One example is the following comments from Michael which came after his description of the economic, social and ideological functions of education under capitalism.

*I mean it's not all that bad, but if you want to paint the dark picture, and I think we've gotta face up to this at some point, that's where it's at, and of course there are a lot of good people doing good things in there, and glimmers of hope, but if you look at the systemic part of it, that's how the system is set up (Michael).*

As Michael made this statement it finished as a sort of question, and was met with nods of agreement and understanding. Despite the fragmentation of resistance and of critique, participants seemed driven nevertheless by an emotional and moral/ethical commitment which saw them (as a matter of fact) able to see each other as allies, celebrating victories, empathising with the challenges and ultimately being optimistic about the potential for future change. The reality for most of the participants is that they have lived their entire ‘educational lives’, either as students, parents of students, or ‘educational workers’ outside of a time of mass, political struggle. Even those most active and engaged in politics, are unlikely to have experienced anything like what Bruce would have in the 60s and 70s through the various social (mass) movements of that time, something that has inevitably shaped their overall political perspectives. The significance of this is raised later in the thesis in terms of broader implications given an absence of strategic clarity amongst radical and progressive educators. However, it is considered important to note here, that despite such a situation, the shared commitment to a world vastly different from one driven by neoliberal values, saw each participant bring their own version of ‘educated hope’ to the conversations, ready and willing to contribute further to a discussion felt to be based on a bigger, collective historical body of knowledge and experience.

The sense of solidarity fostered by the participants for one another could be viewed as one reason for the high level of critical self-reflection shown. Participants seemed to feel able and comfortable to reflect critically about their own positions in the education system. Across all the sectors, they discussed the inevitable influences of the neoliberal reality upon them and shared the ways they attempt to resist, and/or at times the ways in

which they do not. One example of this was senior academic Heather reflecting on the powerful ways the ideology of neoliberal education can affect even those critical of the system.

*I think at its worst, which is probably as it stands... [Education's] purpose is maintaining the status quo, and we all get sucked into that... because it's the access thing... even if I think of my own experience, first in family to go through all sorts of levels of things, when you're on the in, you kind of get sucked into the idea that this was something to be achieved and to take hold of (Heather).*

Another was secondary school teacher Rachel talking about the challenges faced by an educator committed to democracy working in an undemocratic education system.

*...just the point that I think with a 1-25 class ratio you do end up being more authoritarian than you want to, and of course my perspective would be that power is corrupting and so you actually get a bit high on that power and thinking wow everybody is really interested in what I've got to say and it's actually quite an addictive process to gain control and power in that way (Rachel).*

These and other contributions suggest that the roundtable participants, despite mostly limited, and in some cases, no familiarity or knowledge of each other before participation, considered the conversations to be a safe space to honestly and openly discuss the substantial themes of the study. It is suggested here that this is uncommon in educational settings generally, where there is often considered to be an agenda and a sub-text, or in other words a hidden agenda deemed too unrealistic, controversial, or pointless to raise - an overwhelming hegemony. Moreover, such a scenario presents an alternative perspective to the participants' own observations and ample research literature that suggests issues of hierarchy, mistrust, and lack of understanding amongst and between different sectors of the education system and the community more broadly. Given the purpose and nature of these dialogues, a deep moral inclination as well as a shared commitment to resisting Neoliberalism, underpinned a respectful, honest and ultimately hopeful interaction, revealing a particular type of 'community bond' amongst participants, a sort of 'comradeship'.

### **The Purpose of Education: ideally envisioned**

When asked to articulate their own ideal views of the purpose of schooling, or "education for what?," a fundamental idea that education should be about fostering the

full development of human creative capacity was raised with general agreement across all three roundtables. Terms like passion, curiosity and creativity were elevated as important in such a process, as shown in the following comment from Heidi as she is thinking through what she wants for her son.

*I want [my son] to be engaged with learning, and really fired by his own curiosity and interests and I guess lead the way without fear of being assessed or judged by other people (Heidi).*

The theme of learning having deep relevance in students' lives was emphasised in another contribution from academic Kim, who also raised the importance of relationships.

*... I want the schools to bring out the passion in those kids, what is it that makes real meaning in their lives and then how can the schools work with them to do that... it is the passions of each of those kids and how they relate with the people in their classrooms and their teachers, that is terribly important as they grow through the school system (Kim).*

The following two comments from parent Rebecca and community activist Michael illuminate the ways in which the conversations explored the relationship between the individual and the collective in an idealised education system. Rebecca talked about the importance of shared learning as a fundamental aspect of community democracy and shared vision of the 'public good'.

*...to learn social agreements... giving them "what's our social plan"... we're expanding [students'] horizons to other cultures, to other ways of life whatever. ...ideally ... it's building as many of those little neuron connections in the brain as possible so that when they're adults they have the capacity to do whatever [they want], but also providing them with "this is the agreed social contract in our society"... I think sometimes for me that obligation to send your children to a state school isn't about funding or whatever, it's about making sure everybody understands that there're agreed obligations in our society and there's an agreed base from which, as a culture we've decided this is the parameters within which we operate (Rebecca).*

Michael referred to education as analogous to being on a journey of both self-discovery and social consciousness (awareness), with learner initiative at the centre of the process.

*... to me the purpose of education should be the empowerment of the individuals within, and communities that should emerge out of those relationships, it should be about people going on a journey to find themselves, to learn something about the world around them and to work out how to relate to each other, to the rest of the environment, in society, in the economy, in the family, in the community,*

*whatever it might be. And it should be, in an ideal world, it would be able to respond to every initiative that the learner wants to take (Michael).*

Sophia also raised the question of social relationships being at the heart of learning, recounting a conversation she had had with a principal of a school which revealed that school's commitment to a strong emphasis on developing students as whole people, something Sophia's comments suggested was rare.

*... [the principal said] "we observed the kids had very little access to pets at home, because there was less time to look after them, or the parents had decided against it... well how can we make sure the kids still have the experience?" So they set up all these pet areas in the school corridors... and he said [this] group of kids, they had responsibilities so the pets were being looked after, and one girl she was nominated the head of the group, and he said "oh why did you nominate her?", and they said "oh because she always cleans up the shit", and he said "oh that's interesting, someone who gets their hands dirty is recognised by the grade ones, as the person who takes responsibility!" So he has all these little social situations... lots of social experiences outside of school to make sure that the kids go to the nursing home and have an experience of caring because all that caring work that is totally unacknowledged, is something that kids will have to do one day or at least relate to, or there might be social experiences already in their families, and it's just a way of having outside of the school experiences that not only validates their social knowledges but also brings it back into the classrooms and have discussions... (Sophia)*

Taken together, the comments from Rebecca, Michael and Sophia go some way to capturing the sentiment of the roundtable participants that ideally, education should be a process of full creative engagement with the development of oneself as a rounded whole, human being, in an overall context of developing social consciousness based on collective responsibility and collaboration. The 'values' they evoke in describing this ideal infer that success might therefore be measured on the basis of such attributes as creativity, cooperation and social responsibility. Such values and attributes are antithetical to the indicators of 'success' under Neoliberalism, described here by Giroux (2002, p. 100).

Escape, avoidance, and narcissism are now coupled with the public display, if not celebration, of those individuals who define agency in terms of their survival skills rather than their commitment to dialogue, critical reflection, solidarity, and relations that open up the promise of public engagement with important social issues.

Extending those fundamental ideas the discussions then led to the more explicit concept of fostering critical consciousness through learning, evoking what might be described as a specifically Freirean perspective on learning as individuals constructing meaning in their own lives. In other words, developing a “world-view” which Hiebert describes as the “fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives” (Hiebert, 2008, p. 15). The Freirean concept of *conscientização* which “refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (translator’s note from Freire, 1970, pg. 17) was inferred as the participants used their own words to describe such a process and its perceived importance in a learning context.

*... education should be about people realising and developing their full human potential... and schools specifically should be about helping students to develop critical and creative capacities to deal with the world around them and to emancipate themselves from dominant systems and ideologies in society (Pablo).*

*I sort of see my function in the classroom as trying to develop... critical consciousness ... around the political system and around society so that people will hopefully leave the classroom and start to engage so that they can be part of making change in society, and having the capacity to sort of see through the lies (Rachel).*

Rachel and Pablo’s comments here introduce a more politicised notion of critical consciousness., and capture how the conversations explored the concept not only from an individual development point of view, but in terms of the potential for individual and collective empowerment, through agents knowing and understanding, as the basis for action.

Higher Education equity worker Jim located the discussion explicitly in the context of current partnerships activity which emphasises ‘inclusion’ and ‘aspirations’. For Jim the emphasis must move from individual benefit and gain to a commitment to the public good.

*...when it comes down to it, my understanding of how I imagine education to be... should be that for students you are understanding the society you’re in and there’s all these opportunities you should have but you critically understand it, and that basically ... depending on your position in that society you have lots of opportunities or very little, and it should challenge you to do something about it regardless of your position, so if you’re in a privileged position do something about it (Jim).*

In what emerged as an important thread across all three conversations, the emphasis on critical consciousness as fundamental to education for public good was directly counterposed to neoliberal versions of ‘inclusion’ and ‘achievement’ as successful education. Neoliberal partnerships viewed as largely disempowering for grass roots actors, were rejected in favour of a process of collective consciousness building that positions people to determine their own needs and appropriate course of action for change.

Central to this was consideration of the relationship between education and democracy. Having characterised Neoliberalism as inherently undemocratic, and neoliberal partnerships as maintaining current privilege and disadvantage as opposed to challenging it, the roundtable participants expressed a range of views on the democratic potential of public education systems. Sophia, parent and academic, suggested a framework of *deliberative democracy* as a means to develop an education system based on and informed by a collective sense of purpose, and genuinely inclusive and democratic in the fullest sense.

*... it's around styles of deliberative democracy where we all get together and we talk about what our goals and aims are, of the education system, so ideally from a progressive point of view, you could say well if there are ten things we can all agree on, maybe sustainability, human rights... it's not proscriptive, but is there a process of arriving at this kind of purposeful education and then designing a model and streams, and subjects, rather than a discipline driven curriculum? Have a deliberative democracy kind of approach and then derive whatever comes from that... it's usually the other way around. And there is nothing wrong with disciplinary knowledge or anything, it's just where do we want to head? And probably throwing in some kind of capabilities approach where you talk about the full human capacities that we could all hope to develop, one day or another, without this grand thing that we all need to reach and this kind of perfectionism, and exploitation that will come with a vast set of developmental aims that you hope to never reach, kind of thing... I think for me the purpose of education and the democratic process are in-divorceable, really part and parcel, and so even if we talk about other social problems, or issues, it's always well how do we get the lot there, not just a few people (Sophia).*

The important elements of Sophia's vision, and those which distinguish it from the present system, are a commitment to publicly determined curricula based on broad social needs as opposed to individual advantage, and the genuinely expressed intention to involve (include) all (“*not just a few people*”). The scenario she imagines, of collective, democratically organised forums defining a shared set of objectives aimed at reaching full human capacity, can only be conceived of outside of the current system

which sees educational decision-making subsumed under market needs and goals. Sophia is advocating an approach where the education system is central to developing people's individual and collective capacity to determine educational (and other) needs and goals *apart from the market*. Through one contribution, Jim attempted to explore how such practice might look. Speaking specifically about schools but making a point more generally applicable to educational institutions and possibilities for 'partnering', he suggested that active participation in local democratic structures and processes, as a means to ensuring the voices and experiences and needs of students and families are heard, would be necessary and an important aspect of determining the basis for collaboration.

*...the way I've been thinking about it too, is not just about schools reaching out to communities, but having schools playing a role in community level democracy. So it's not just about, ok you have representation from different groups on the school council, it's - and this is the kind of vision thing, the ideal - you say well the school is part of how this community determines what its educational needs are, and its starting point is the most oppressed and disadvantaged people in our community, and how do we make sure that they are being heard. And that may involve a process of dialogue where the school actually assists (Jim).*

## **Identifying and defining needs in partnerships**

Jim's comment above highlights a recurring point emphasised throughout all three roundtables, that being the question of *need*, and the importance of asking and understanding whose needs were driving partnership activity. Discussions around this were invariably complex, with phrases like "community need" and "local needs" being challenged and drawn out, as participants grappled with the question of *why* partnerships might be formed. One participant, Tom, a secondary school teacher and community activist, raised a very politicised view of the bases upon which partnerships might be constructed, given his vision for 'public good education'.

*I think a necessarily ambiguous term, when we're talking about communities, and obviously you've written in terms of localities and interests, we could be talking about different types of communities, and to me that's the essential question really, because partnering with who? And with groups of people who have basically what ideas? Because in terms of thinking about progressive education or education for human liberation basically, well then in the context of the Australian society today, neoliberal dominated, and as you said when you have this isolation of the family unit and the fact that all this actually tends to create a more reactionary set of ideas, well then partnership with community in that*

*context, I think really the question needs to be addressed first, of well what the ideas in the community are... (Tom)*

Such an approach is precisely what ‘partnership’ under Third Way Neoliberalism does *not* offer, as it sets up the context that fosters the isolation and alienation Tom is talking about, and moreover negates discussion of those issues, given that the very act of ‘partnering’ is held up in and of itself as a strategic response to ‘problems’ faced by communities. The actual existing challenge Tom is exposing here, that of working through the complexity of understanding local needs in a climate where grass roots voices and experiences are marginalised out of existence from a policy point of view, is one Neoliberalism has no actual interest in responding to.

Tom raises another issue, that of the potentially ‘reactionary’ ideas of ‘community’ as bases for partnership. As Freire raises repeatedly throughout his writing, in the context of neoliberal ideological hegemony and the divisive dynamics of oppression and exploitation, it is to be expected that some manifestations of ‘community’ will crystallise reactionary sentiments. Community is a dynamic category both in terms of its actual material composition as well as in ideological terms; every community will reflect in contradictory ways aspects of the cultural hegemony (Neoliberalism) as well as reflecting subversive tendencies. The point here is to reflect on which of those elements is being fostered or blocked through educational ‘partnering’.

Tom continued, raising the example of racism in Australian society, as one which fundamentally undermined collaboration and learning in his TAFE classroom but seemed by him unlikely to be taken up by a ‘partnership’ as he has experienced them.

*...the primary thing that is in my mind every time I’m teaching and when I’m not teaching as well... Australian society is - while there is a very disadvantaged large section of the population - it’s also an extremely privileged society, internationally, and that is used as a way to divide our society, and implant very reactionary and particularly racist ideas... this is the very concrete thing I come up against in my TAFE classes...that the racist dynamic within the classroom is the thing that in my view undermines the learning environment for the most disadvantaged students and kind of poisons the whole dynamic in a way that it’s hard to I guess bring more progressive, anti-racist for a start and other progressive ideas forward. I think Australian society to me is one where you have large sections of working people really separated from ideas about human development and human liberation and so on in the way that we’d like to see it, by the fact that they’re kind of bought off with their larger garages and so on, and*

*there're privileges based on Australia's being one of 20 or 25 rich countries in a world where you've got 150 others basically, and the racism that's necessary to justify that (Tom).*

*To maintain that privilege (Sue).*

*Yeah, and I know racism is really only one issue, but in Australia it seems to be extremely dominant in many areas of social life, so I think there needs to be attempts I guess within, whatever the partnerships, the framework has to be addressing essential political and social questions that are actually responsible for oppression in and outside of schools (Tom).*

In the first instance, Tom's contribution and the discussion it provoked, put into question the use of 'community' as a precise enough social and analytical category, inviting sociological considerations of class, race and gender. His comments also reflect precisely the situation Freire warns us against, one where oppression is talked about in such a way that the actual practices and structures that underpin such oppression are left unidentified. For example, a partnership may be considered 'inclusive', as it seeks to include more Aboriginal students into a particular educational context, but consist entirely of talk and activity that leaves responses only in the hands of individuals with no investigation of the deeply systemic nature of racism. For Freire, such a situation can inevitably only lead to deception, and therefore contribute to the reinforcement of oppression rather than liberation.

### **Questioning the constitution of 'community'?**

In another conversation, Higher Education equity worker Jim, again speaking about what he refers to as "surplus communities" - those communities that lie beyond the scope of even the most benevolent scholarship program, "abandoned by the market" - calls for educational institutions to assist communities to identify their own needs as a basis for any 'partnering'. He counter poses community development conceived of in a neoliberal framework with an alternative approach that seems inspired by something like a *Funds of Knowledge* approach (Moll, Amanti, Neffe, & Gonzalez, 1992; Zipin et al., 2012).

*I think what universities could really do on a more radical model, is basically say, ok it's not just that the people in these communities are marginalised, they are marginalised communities, they are basically surplus communities, like in the west, post-industrial communities, or in rural communities. And that is not an acceptable situation. Every community should be able to plan educationally, economically, environmentally, how can we have a productive community where everyone can participate. And that's what universities could do, with all their facilities, and so our design and architecture people could actually go into those communities and go well what sort of spaces do you need – like the opposite of what happened with the hub (Jim turns to Will, and refers to Will's earlier comments about a community partnership that resulted in a hub<sup>10</sup>) – “oh you want a hub!”, “no we don't want a hub”, “yes you want a hub, here is your hub.” It's using those resources in a way, saying ok rather than well “we're going to train you up to be like us, and then we'll pick some of you”, it's ok well we go in and have a dialogue with those communities about what are the most pressing things, which prevent this from actually being a productive community, and that's really kind of at the opposite end of the scale to what's happening. But I think we have to dream about what that sort of thing could be. And the potential is there to do it, it's just... it's heading in a totally different direction to what the actual policy direction is (Jim).*

In reflecting on the wholesale abandonment of some communities by the market approach, Jim presents a notion of educational partnerships as ‘authentic community development’, suggesting that schools and universities could determine *engagement activities* on the basis of local community need/s, as expressed by them. At the same time he recognises that this attitude and/or expectation runs directly counter to the current dominant neoliberal agenda in educational partnerships. Alongside the inherent political danger in asking and supporting local communities to decide their own partnership agenda - through which they are likely to challenge existing policy frameworks - the very form of partnerships under Neoliberalism precludes such an open and organic practice. The effectiveness agenda and its need to quantitatively measure every ‘output’ or ‘deliverable’; demand rigid, controlled and usually short timelines; as well as bureaucratic requirements and obligations to secure funding; function to curtail genuine buy-in to the kind of partnership activity that Jim is speaking about. Jim's vision of partnerships insists that appropriate measures of organisation and accountability could be determined by the community/ies themselves. Jim's vision also importantly infers the need for broad, open and flexible partnerships, recognising the interconnectedness of issues at a local level, as he emphasises the right of particular regions he calls “abandoned communities” to fully engage with the concept of being

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<sup>10</sup> p. 113

productive and engaged. This suggests that single-issue or narrowly-conceived partnerships are also less likely to be able to meaningfully address the issues facing the community, and more likely to focus on individual success stories as he begins to explain in the following comment.

*... basically a lot of these regional communities and some of the inner urban communities have been abandoned, the market model is not working for them, there's not investment coming into Broady or to Sunshine, and so part of that has to be saying ok well what does this community need, and what can educational institutions, and local communities do on a smaller scale, to actually do things. And how can schools cooperate in those sorts of things as well. Because otherwise it is just this model of ok well we're going to take some of your kids out and give them an opportunity to queue up for a tertiary qualification (Jim).*

In another conversation community activist Michael raised different but connected themes as he attempted to explicitly describe the kind of relationship required between schools and universities if the needs of local communities and schools are to be the basis of partnership activity and action for change. In this comment he is grappling with both the practices of and relationships between educational institutions under Neoliberalism and the impact of that on any partnering or community building role they may have.

*...that's where we've got to build that sense of community between the school and the university, it's like how do we define the relationship between the school and the university at the moment, I'm talking about at a meta level, well universities rely on schools to bring students up to a certain level that can qualify them for entrance to university, and the schools ... in this case are relying on the university to train a certain amount of teachers, looking also at that micro level, the university is relying on the school to provide a learning environment for those student teachers, but ... what impact does that have on a school? There are probably a few other levels you could add to that... the whole way we view that relationship is extremely commodified, and so to me the sort of principles that have just emerged from this conversation, trust is one of them, I think there's this thing about asking and listening, and the other thing is about power, and identifying who has the power here in a certain sense... we've got to realise again, that sense of community, while none of us has the power as an individual or as one institution within the sector, but if we all come together and come back to Question One: What's the purpose of what we're trying to do here? Then we can form a community on the basis of that, we might have slightly different ideas about the purpose, but that's gotta be... you know we've gotta form a community, and once we form a community then we work out "oh we need schools in order to be able to do the things that schools need to do, and we need universities to do those things", and we might have a slightly more integrated model rather than two things sitting like this [motions two entities sitting parallel, beside one another], and I think, that suggestion about let's get the people to work in both at once and then it will be both an academic and a teacher and suddenly those labels*

*would start to crumble in people's minds. That's a good practical embodiment of a whole bunch of those principles, I think the key thing is let's have that conversation at the university, we're seen as the more powerful, even if we don't feel it, go in, ask, what does the school need, let's tell you what we need... let's sit down and talk about it, and you've got to have that with everyone, it can't just be the principal, and the dean or whoever it is sitting down, 'cause you have to build, that's the process of community isn't it, identifying our need, identifying our resources and our power and being able to give that up, and open to a sense of collaboration (Michael).*

Michael's comment, which also constitutes an attempt to define or describe 'community need' in educational partnerships, reflects the earlier raised theme of commodification, and emphasises the importance of decoupling community from commodity.

Neoliberalism has forced an almost complete identity of the two; as if all community needs can be monetarised and marketised. Michael's commentary brings into focus the importance of reinvigorating humanist and other liberal and non-liberal conceptions of human development and identity. Although the kind of approach both Jim and Michael were inferring was not really fleshed out beyond these initial cogitations in any of the roundtables, there was some further discussion of what such alternatives might look like in practice.

### **Communities and leadership**

Interestingly several teacher participants discussed the question of school leadership as being critical in the process of determining needs, raising the notion of "*having a good principal.*" This broadly translated as having a principal who understood and shared at least the wider teaching staff's views on teaching and learning, if not those of the parents and of the school community more broadly. One anecdote retold the story of the principal in a medium sized regional area who spent their government-provided Building the Education Revolution funds<sup>11</sup> on a state of the art hockey field.

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<sup>11</sup> Part of a government economic stimulus plan in response to the 2008 global economic crisis, the *Building the Education Revolution* program constituted a range of funding to support new and refurbished infrastructure for eligible Australian schools. The final report of the implementation taskforce for that program can be accessed here <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/175507011>

*...the principal up there just stood back... and asked what does this community need rather than what does this school need? And as a result of it the school wins as well... (Phil)*

Phil, now working in Higher Education but having spent time in a leadership role in schools himself, spoke at length about what he saw as a decision by the Principal to turn the relationship between school and community on its head, with positive outcomes for both. He and other participants considered the differences such a perspective made and drew on comparisons with other settings.

*Part of that meant that they built meeting rooms on the school site that during the day could be classrooms but weren't counted as part of the classroom formula, so really enhanced... The hockey club moved out of literally a tin shed into spectacular rooms and it just became a real focal point... I think as a metaphor - the doors opening, or these classrooms, opened out on to the hockey field, and you look across and see... the environment is almost coming into the classroom as well, I just thought you know as a piece of architecture, as a physical thing, it was really representative of how we should be blurring the edges, rather than... and yet down here [in the metropolitan regions] to some extent, the biggest capital expense in many ways is brand new fences around schools, and they are 10 foot, black, and I understand why some of these schools do it, but it is a bit of a metaphor (Phil).*

*And things like that hockey ground allows for different pedagogies and approaches, in terms of taking account of the new environment, "oh this isn't a classroom, we're going to try something different here", and so I think that lends itself to... (Will)*

*Well you know if you look at little things like transition, if you've got grade 5 and 6 kids up there playing hockey on Saturdays, when it comes time to go to the local secondary school, it's not foreign ground, and plenty of parents are there, for hockey and they happen to be having meetings in rooms that become classrooms and off it goes. So I think it was a very creative and a very responsible venture for the school and the principal (Phil).*

Although just one story, Phil's account of a principal choosing to spend school development funds on a community hockey field and club rooms, and the comparison he makes with metropolitan schools building tall, black security fences and gates, assumedly to keep 'the community' out, conjures up powerful conflicting images, of critical relevance to the themes of this study. In another conversation Jim also expressed how powerful it can be when those in leadership positions in school actively resist external pressures and instead consider and prioritise local community needs, seeking

out opportunities for the school and community to cooperate in a way that is meaningful and productive for both. He pointed out that such an approach runs counter to the trend in neoliberal partnerships and is a counter example to the leadership approach which is presently hailed as successful.

*...what's happening is it's part of this school leadership model... part of your test to kind of seize the right opportunities to drive your outcomes and push your indicators up. So the better "managers", the principal-managers, and they're doing the right things on quite a few levels, but it's basically if you structure your partnership opportunities right and you do that sort of thing, you'll get better VCE results and you'll get better benchmarks, so it's all still within this model of rationing and time limited and for only a limited number of students.*

Phil's detailed account provided more concrete detail than most, when asked about possibilities for alternative partnerships. Generally, the roundtable discussions focused on broad brainstorming, reflecting key principles rather than explicit practices. Parent Rebecca for example raised a vision of engagement that emphasised taking resources in educational institutions (in this case schools and students!) into communities to enrich life in general and to promote a locally-grounded and connected type of learning for students.

*So should you look at community engagement the other way around? And so it's instead of having people coming to the schools, the schools are going out... like [at my daughter's school] in year 9 the kids go out and spend time with adults with intellectual disabilities at David House, or they go in and they teach kids how to skateboard on the skate parks, so you know rather than schools engaging with the community and expecting them to come to them that they actually go out and that somehow you invest community engagement in the school by the school having some kind of community service, an essential... right through. I know [a local] crèche recently had a program where the kids went to the nursing home and they bought books in all the languages of the old people in the nursing home and matched them with the kids from those language groups and so all of a sudden there was this huge fantastic program where language was being built and books were being read and so turn it on its head that rather than the school going "come and help us", the school goes out and then you have a different kind of... (Rebecca)*

Despite the unquestionable potential of such activity to be genuine in enriching people's lives, Rebecca's example is one of many such activities that have both humanistic inspiration and potential but are also easily turned against themselves in a (neoliberal) framework where value only has a market measure. The problem lies in the way the logic of the market elevates the activities or elements of them that can be commodified

and erodes those that cannot. Hence even what is 'good' is so only to the extent that it can contribute to any or all of those things the market values and needs: employable skills, competitive attitudes, ambitious aspirations, etc. Under neoliberalism universities act as a conveyor belt for the logic of the market, their leadership in partnerships most often affecting the diminution of local and grassroots voices and aspirations. The possibilities of the university providing any leadership subversive of the neoliberal logic rely on the internal contradictions of those institutions. As historically demonstrated such contradictions may from time to time produce counter-hegemonic tendencies from within the university, themselves restricted but aspiring to challenge the same logic as the communities the university seeks to partner with.

Demonstrating the importance of acknowledging internal contradiction and struggle as a positive in problematising partnerships, secondary school teacher Pablo, emphasised the earlier point made by Jim, about an 'open-endedness' to enable need to emerge through the partnership, rather than being predetermined.

*So I guess would it be, redesigning the actual programs and partnerships that you have in place, or rethinking who you're actually going to go into partnership with? I can't really answer the question but I think that the major theme that comes up, is that whatever partnership it should be on a mutual basis, you know you're not getting some corporation or whatever who is like "oh we want to do a partnership" - because it's for their benefit. It needs to be genuine and there needs to be some sort of cultural or intellectual exchange, and I guess like the outcomes of that would be more open ended as opposed to sort of boxed in, that's my thoughts (Pablo).*

Pablo's and others' attempts at theorising 'community need' in post-neoliberal terms are recognised as a critical element of developing counter-hegemonic practices in partnerships. The roundtable participants instinctively imagined community needs, drawing on experiences of local bonds and echoing universal values, yet to be fully repressed by Neoliberalism, and yet struggled to ascribe such ideas with concrete, material form. The conversations revealed the limitations and contradictions of such imagining, perhaps largely explained by the general absence of any experiences of counter-hegemonic mass and collective political action in the Australian context for several decades.

Tania, who came to Australia from Mexico several years ago, shared a very specific example from the area in Mexico where her family lives, as a means to draw out some of her key questions and thoughts on educational collaboration for 'the public good'. Her contribution provided an example of the visions and collectivist practices such mass political activity can inspire and construct.

*I think the main challenge is not within the school system, or the education system itself, but in the community and social system... we live in communities that are very atomised, and everybody is just concerned about their own stuff and living where they can afford because that's the way the system works. I had the opportunity to visit the Zapatista's schools in Mexico, in the south of my country, and the school which is the same from kinder to high school, it's like the same school, and it's at the centre of each community, and they are like little buildings, or like houses, that people built... The state does not put any money into that, they decided not to, and the community had to organise to obtain even the resources, so they built their own buildings, decorated by the workers, the students, and their parents, or visitors or anyone who wants to participate, part of their curriculum is to work in the corn fields, or whatever they grow, because that's what the community do, they are agricultural based communities, so that's what they have to do as work, they do fishing if they have rivers, depending on which community they live on. Their parents participate, often they get offered different positions every semester, or year, within the school, and some have to learn something to teach their children and all the students at the school. So I think it's very, very participatory. And it's also in the framework of communities who are challenging the national system at all scales, not only in education, but economically, socially, the judicial system. Everything is being challenged, by indigenous communities, they learn in their native tongue, and they learn Spanish as well, and probably one of my wildest dreams would be that we could have community schools like that, with those principles (Tania).*

Through her personal and animated account of community education experiences in Zapatista-controlled areas of Mexico, Tania raised the importance of mass political action and leadership on developing notions and potential practices of authentic community empowerment. Her contribution clearly provided new information for most of her fellow participants, who had limited to no knowledge of the Zapatistas' struggle and their approaches to education and community, and as such had an indelible impact on the conversation in her roundtable, essentially blowing open the boundaries of possibility. In Tania's roundtable the participants used the seemingly utopian ideas of the Zapatista communities as a springboard to break open a deeper consideration of the relationship between community and learning, and community education and educational institutions as they currently stand. Michael jumped in with what he saw as a new angle on the same question, having listened to Tania's narrative.

*I think that's the challenge, how do we create the communities first? Or it's sort of a parallel process that somewhere from here we need to embark on... creating the community and then at the same time creating the community education, and collaborative education processes that we want...if everyone is engaged in that process then, that knowledge and expertise is shared amongst the community and it becomes much more collaborative process, more participatory, and you know, education should be a central part of life, rather than a little thing that some people go to, for a few years... (Michael)*

Sophia also attempted to describe how “schools [might] emerge out of communities, as opposed to schools servicing particular communities...” Here Michael and Sophia are grappling with the most fundamental contradiction inherent in both a liberal and neoliberal concept of education. It is argued here that they and all of us will continue to struggle to define such a vision for education, as long as it remains subsumed under the needs of the market, as opposed to being a driver of democratic and participatory social and economic decision-making and revolutionary change.

### **Problematising ‘community’**

After expressing similarly articulated views on the need for interests other than corporate interests to drive educational collaboration, all three roundtables continued to grapple with the difficulties of the notion of “community needs”, of defining ‘community’; or more dynamically, as Michael put it at one point in the dialogue, “making community”.

*...if you're going to use the word community, it's an interesting one and whenever I hear a politician say “I think we need to engage the community”, or you know “the community has been telling me” I think who!?” (Bruce).*

*Yeah absolutely, who's got the loudest voice (Heidi)*

*And why do they never say “my community”, or “our community”?” (Lily).*

As these comments show, in attempting to reconcile their own individual and collective understandings of the term community, participants considered the realities of ‘communities’ today, the complexity of issues behind identification of ‘a community’ and the contextual factors driving (competing) needs at both local and larger intersections. Along the way they reflected on the implications for educational ‘change’.

One example of this is Rebecca's observations of the changing pressures and expectations for parents.

*... and for me the difference from when I was a stay at home mum with my 17 year old and when I've been at home with my 5 year old, you know there's almost nobody, the only people at home are the ones with really tiny little babies... and even to have a playgroup [is too difficult] ...and this sense that when I started ... probably half the mothers were able to come in and do things and have gardens and whatever, and there's still a little bit of that, but you know the pressure, and I mean I think that's probably because we're in the inner suburbs, if you go out to the outer suburbs which are ghost towns, I mean how do you create a sense of community and a sense of community engagement when you've got to drive an hour to go into town or work, and all that sort of stuff is really quite tricky (Rebecca).*

Rebecca's capturing of some of the effects of economic and social policy over the past two decades on families reveal important realities impacting on partnerships and their outcomes. Essentially the dominant partnerships discourse is motivated by and organised around the market-subjects who have more, rather than less, to offer the market. In this way partnerships can be "successful" in further and more efficiently and profitably incorporating these subjects into the workings and successes of the market. Both Rebecca's comments here and Sue's earlier narrative contrasting a school's 'inclusion' agenda with its decision to take out a restraining order against a 'difficult' parent, both demonstrate how those working class people with less to offer are in fact considered strains and costs to the market; best dealt with not in partnership but through coercion.

Throughout the roundtables the participants referred to and contemplated the lack of time and space to consider and develop any well-articulated sense of community; a reflection on the historical framework and the incapacitating culture of a triumphalist Neoliberalism.

One discussion that arose was around the phrase the "missionary approach", which was used to describe and discuss the fact that many school teachers, particularly those teaching in working-class areas, were understood not to be living in the same suburb as their place of employment. Furthermore, accompanying this was an impression that non-teaching staff tended to live locally, reflecting something of a hierarchy of local engagement amongst school staff. The overall assertion was that, generally speaking,

there is very little beyond a formal connection to workplaces as ‘employees’, and/or the legal requirement of attending school for students and families, that brings ‘school communities’ together. In thinking through the implications for education grounded in ‘community’, secondary school and TAFE teacher Rachel raised the alternative of ‘re-localisation’ as one possible aspect of authentic community engagement.

*...that will be, that's actually part of the solution here, is a re-localisation, that if you're part of the community and you actually have to face the question I'm going to send my kids to the local schools, I live here, I own it, like there's much more sense of ownership and connection within local communities (Rachel).*

However, as the pressure for parents to search widely for their school of choice increases, and students are travelling some distance to attend school, families themselves can have very limited connection to the school ‘community’ and the very meaning and content of local communities changes dramatically.

This appears to fit in with the longer historical evolution of schools under capitalism, growing from an extension of the family concerned especially with moral education, toward an ever more complex and integrated element of state policy and cultural hegemony. The dilemma for educationalists and activists is that this is precisely not just about ‘local’ community, and a key dilemma is that ‘local community’ cannot be simply countered to Neoliberalism. A bigger narrative is required, one that challenges critical and counter-hegemonic forces to conceive of community in more global terms. This is reflected in the frustrations of the roundtable participants as they grapple with problems of ‘local’ partnership and trying to build alternatives.

### **The complexities and contradictions of ‘community’**

Returning to Tom’s comments raised earlier, primary school teacher Jock (and others) also reflected on the question of competing interests within ‘communities.’

*...the idea of the challenge of trying to get communities involved now, at one level communities already are involved, and sometimes they are the negative pressures, the where's the homework, where's this, where's that, why aren't I getting good marks in the NAPLAN, all the rest of it. It just seems to me that these exceptions where people, a group, comes together around interests and so forth, are the exception rather than the situation, that we're sort of facing... (Jock).*

Jock's comments are reflecting the fact that the economic policies of Neoliberalism explored by participants in Chapter Five, and the priorities they engender, all create real and multiple restraints on work and tasks in schools that are not considered essential, and measurable. Rachel contributed further to this question as she contrasted the notion of 'community need' between her previous school, and alternative setting for students no longer able to attend mainstream school, and her present school, a large public school in the western suburbs trying to improve its profile as it competes for student numbers.

*...yeah the interesting thing there would be that the things I described before about [my current school] being a very authoritarian school, I think that was definitely of the desire of the parent community that's what, particularly the Vietnamese, but what the migrant community wanted from their local school, and so that's what the school provided, and I think that's a really interesting thing around this question because you might say, like out... in [my previous school] we were dealing with kids who had been thrown out of every other school, so we were given incredible autonomy, just do something with these kids, so when you're in that situation it's quite easy, to do something progressive, but when you're in a situation, and that's why I guess, social change has to go along with educational change, because in that area people have literally given everything up to come and get their kids a good education and a positive start and all they want is for their kids to succeed under capitalism. They don't want to transform capitalism, they don't want their kids to necessarily pursue their passions, they actually don't want their kids to pursue their passions, and so that's really problematic in that sense because the school was providing what the local community wanted, very much so and the kids would have left in droves if it were a less VCE orientated and authoritarian school (Rachel).*

Both Rachel's and Jock's comments highlight the contradictions involved and underscore the fact that 'community' is dynamic and formed by processes of cultural and socio-political struggle, processes which are both contemporary and historical in influences and patterns. As an example in the conversation, the Catholic schooling system was discussed as being able to draw on a more complex web of community bonds, many of which have long historical traditions embedded in the practices of the Church and religion in general. Such bonds were viewed as enabling a more organic link between communities and education sites.

*...so the first thing would be that it's not between the educational institution and a community ideally, but, you know the catholic schools call it, schools as core social centres, or something like that, which is the same thing, just that schools emerge out of communities, as opposed to schools servicing particular communities or something (Sophia).*

The inference was that the inherent ‘community’ connectedness of the Catholic schooling system could be more likely to better foster the kind of “*extended social life*” for schools that parent Rebecca raises as she reflects further on the ideas around ‘community bonds’ and the relationship between in and out of school life.

*...if there is to be community engagement, we have to not look at schools as these babysitting points of 9-3, and things like in the old days there was much more social life around school post time, because there were probably less demands on teachers, so I remember as a child, my mum taught in a highly migrant school, we used to have culture nights every term where the whole school would come and dance and eat, and that kind of engagement was so positive, or you know maths nights, or science nights, or whatever, so because life was less, there was less pressure in those peak hours, there was more extended social life for schools (Rebecca).*

In the absence of such bonds, community appears to dissolve in any meaningful sense in terms of relationships, support, interdependency, let alone empathy or shared responsibility. The issues explored by the roundtable participants, of confused or conflicting ‘community interests’, reflect the potential for communities to succumb to the cultural and socio-political hegemony and its limited offerings (Paulo Freire, 1970). This tends not to be a matter of acceptance but rather resignation.

One comment from Michael highlights the lack of identification of/as ‘community’ in educational settings, across and between all actors.

*...well the reason it's weird when a teacher bumps into a student outside of school, is because we don't see each other as people, in those roles, it's like “the teacher is not a person!”, and the teacher doesn't see the parent as a person they're just a parent, and the student is not a person either... (Michael)*

Here Michael is reflecting on the alienated and commodified character of education under Neoliberalism, where students’, teachers’, parents’, and community members’ interactions with each other are reduced to transactional exchanges: each promoting their own self-interest and without intention, adding to the common good. Like Adam Smith's butcher, brewer and baker (Smith, 1901, p. chap. 2) the teacher, parent and student, so long as they are motivated by an interest in promoting their own market position ('aspiration') are guided by the 'invisible hand of the market' in adding to the common good. There is no need for knowledge as such, no need for human consciousness.

It is argued here that partnerships from a Freirean point of view are necessarily counter posed to neoliberal partnerships: the latter are about creating optimum conditions for the competitive market-subject; whereas, for Freirean practice, partnerships are about empowering the subject to fulfill their humanity, which necessarily means subverting the market. For Freire, it is the ‘invisible hand’ that is the original sin; only ‘consciousness’ of our place in social relations, which under capitalism necessarily means consciousness of our oppression and exploitation, can provide the basis for genuine human discourse and collectivity (Paulo Freire, 1970).

### **The question of autonomy**

In thinking through alternative community values, a number of conversations throughout all three roundtables raised ‘autonomy’ as a potential starting point; a liberatory moment from which new forms of practice may emerge. Rachel described a sense of collective strength in her school’s struggle against forced involvement in a large amalgamation with three other local secondary schools, largely brokered under the banner of shared resourcing.

*...we were meant to become part of the (newly amalgamated)... mega school, and we held the line, and it was school council, parents, teachers, principal all together, everyone voted no... we’re a successful school, we want to stay as our own school, and resisted the region, received much reduced funding for a number of years, all of the consequences that the region can bring down upon principals and schools, but now are back in the good books and have managed to maintain that position (Rachel).*

Rachel’s example is one of localised resistance against ‘partnering’ but is also itself a potentially subversive counter-partnership of community; albeit dependent on possibilities for such, and vision and leadership to develop it. At the same time, such openings can also involve other challenges in the current climate, as the conversation that followed Rachel’s comment shows.

*And there won't be a region now anyway, so... (Sue).*

*Won't there? (Rachel).*

*They're getting rid of the... well getting rid of the RNL's (Sue).*

*Scrapping staff... (Jock).*

*Well maybe that's good, I don't know? Or I suppose that's a recentralisation though is it? (Rachel).*

*Well it means that there's going to be more autonomy at the school level which is good and bad. If you've got a good principal and a good community you can do it, otherwise..... (Sue).*

*Yes, otherwise, yeah you can be at the whim of a small group (Rachel).*

This conversation while reflecting on the potential for and nature of space for resistance, also perhaps reflects the present historical vacuum of collective or mass agency: the lack of mass struggles, especially of successful ones, leaves autonomy to be judged not by its subversive potential, but rather by an abstract reason that Neoliberalism has stamped its image on. It is argued here that community-driven education practice needs to start with the assumption (ontologically Freirean) that the vast majority of society is defined by its exclusion: what is not 'capital' is not market-empowered. The power of such community comes instead from their 'consciousness' of their oppression and exploitation and their creative potential and the power this unleashes. Authentic community partnerships, hence, are defined by their degree of consciousness and determination to subvert the rule of capital. Education has the potential to play the pivotal role in such authentic partnerships precisely because its realisation – as good practice – encourages consciousness and hence agency.

### **Imagining authentic community building**

The collective problematising of 'community' provided the basis upon which participants began to imagine what they saw as being 'authentic' community building in educational frameworks or settings. They attempted to name, or at least anticipate, the

features, or elements of educational policy and practice that might be required in the building of *authentic relationships, shared community perspectives and genuine interdependency*. One argument made by community educator and parent Sue, was the need for a break with the idea that learning only takes place in formal institutionalised settings, and for a vision of a very different ‘community engagement framework’.

*Can I move sideways a bit, it's a bit connected I think but for me it's the way education has dominated - formal education, institutionalised education - has dominated and captured our sense of knowledge and wisdom and learning, and we think that we can only learn something when we're sitting in this room right here, and that we've actually as a community forgotten to value other forms of knowledge and learning and it might be my granny's knitting, it might be the way my kids can draw a picture that you put up on the fridge, you know it's been captured by the institution and Neoliberalism to get a job, and I suppose the work I'm doing at [a local council in community education] is a bit more linked in to the lifelong learning stuff... And I suppose part of it is middle class, neoliberal, I don't know, but for me the bits I like about it are about learning and change, and about informal and non-formal, and valuing a whole lot of different, that head-heart-hand wisdom that a lot of people have, from different cultural backgrounds and from different non-intellectual spaces, the other sorts of learning that we have, and we don't have that conversation, we have conversations about schools... (Sue)*

In particular the theme of educational collaboration fostering life-long learning, and facilitating the opening up of schools and universities to communities, to the public, was raised and championed in all three roundtables. Sue imagined a creative and collaborative process at the heart of a ‘reclaiming’ of corporatised educational space, painting a picture of an extended social basis for schools and universities based on the collective and conscious activity of local people

*...and the doors... Imagine if the resources we have for formal education became learning centres that don't finish at 3'o'clock, and in fact the way in which kids use it is just one part of a spectrum of the way we could actually creatively use those resources, which is, people have thought about education and teachers, which is, classrooms that are in at Melbourne [University], you know we've got some pretty amazing physical resources, and we could reclaim then in a different way. I mean that's a bit, it needs an animation and a mobilisation of people which is also a long process, it wouldn't just happen overnight, but... (Sue)*

More than once Patrick raised the idea of sharing the physical resources of educational institutions as a simple way of re-positioning their relationship with communities.

*...having a school that isn't a white elephant after 4 o'clock, or this resource of learning, or sports facilities or whatever they are, to be utilised, you know, open the gates, much more, for the community, as the community (Patrick).*

*I think having links right through from kinder, to local government to sporting clubs, to gardens, and you know to promote an idea of that love of learning, and you mentioned imagination, and through arts and music programs and sports programs, that I suppose are within the curriculum, rather than these lovely things that are outside, and where kids have to turn up after school or before school... I just see more cross age learning, you know, and you can do that I suppose in music and sport programs, and arts programs... (Patrick)*

The question of publically accessible community resources for learning and other activities was posited as a central 'community need', currently not emphasised in educational policy and practice, but potentially a very powerful reason for communities to cooperate, collaborate and learn together beyond formal structures. However as Field (2000) explains, there exist inherent tensions for 'lifelong learning' in a neoliberal framework, which can be seen as an extended approach to education as individual market advantage. More about shifting responsibility for a range of social and public needs away from government to 'civil society' (privatisation), neoliberal lifelong learning bears little resemblance to the more fundamentally humanistic urge as argued for by the participants. Field (2000, p. 252) suggests that it is mostly limited to "work-related education and training", existing mainly in the private sector, as opposed to representing any meaningful public commitment to community education. As Walker summarises

*...by taking the neoliberal globalized order as given, lifelong learning has not only been promoted to help citizens adapt to such an order, but in fact that this move has been accompanied by adult educators and administrators internalising the 'free-market ethic' and offering for-profit and for-the-economy courses and programmes. As adult education morphed into a lifelong learning focused on adaptation to 'workplace' or 'community'... (Walker, 2009, paragraph 11).*

The impact of such a climate on the very concept of community building was raised in each of the roundtables, with participants lamenting the inherent antagonism between neoliberal individualism and competition and attempts to build community based on empathy, solidarity and cooperation. What became clear over the course of each of the three discussions was the lack of concrete and confident visions for alternative

partnership activity that might foster such community building. The following comment from Michael reveals a little of this confusion:

*...I mean I feel like the problem with trying to do partnerships, is that we're trying to address the fact that we've become silo-ised, compartmentalised individuals, and for me to have to relate to you I've got to have a partnership, it's gotta be written up in a document so I can do something together with you. In some areas, even my personal life... I mean to me that's the whole neoliberal thing, isn't it, we're all individual, rational actors pursuing our own self interest, and if we can find a mutual arrangement that's going to benefit both our self interest, we've got a partnership! So I just think it's a bit of a joke in a way, we've got to subvert that language somehow. I mean, at the same time, I kind of go yeah we need more partnerships, because we need more crossover between all these players, and the parents should be coming to the school as a learning experience for the parent. That's part of the reason why they should be coming not so they can contribute something as well, we kind of view everything as a one way flow, and if we want to talk about life-long learning, and how our schools can be places of life-long learning, let's talk about how parents can come to school and learn (Michael).*

As does this comment from Patrick:

*Well I think we've been trained so well to be passive in any form of the democracy we live in. We're told it's democracy, but we vote every four years for democracy, we don't really construct the different elements of that, and that's another perfect example, I mean once again I'm describing how hard it is, but once again because we've been trained to do that, to be passive, to be passive in our education, to be passive in the workplace, so to actually start imagining, or to come up with terms of policies, even as educators or students or parents, I think you're right, I think that's incredibly difficult. And we will have that great conversation, but you know there's our "paid-for-dialogue", ok let's put that into practice, and then we don't have to think about that anymore, but of course it has to be ongoing, to get those ongoing learning options and stuff that we want to happen... (Patrick)*

Michael's and Patrick's comments begin to capture the way participants, by their thinking through the issues facing the task of building community, were urging a recalling of the 'subject'. In other words arguing for agency and empowerment, decrying the objectification of students and families, arguing against technocratic objectives in place of community, and instead valuing base level democracy, autonomy and decision-making.

### **Relationships: humanising collaboration and education**

Another aspect of their critique of neoliberal education as being a hyper-individualistic and alienating experience for most, was the participants' emphasis on the importance

(and difficulty) of fostering and building meaningful, respectful relationships, and of genuine collaboration.

*...and I know we talk about trying to connect these things, but you know how it's done, and how often it's done, and how well it's done... I guess that's what we're here to discuss.... the idea of promoting a love of learning, and a love of ongoing learning. I think, if we have a look at ourselves I work in the secondary school system, and you have teachers flat out, all day just promoting and dedicating themselves to this teaching, whether they might have had a science background, or a maths background or an English background. They might have even had an interest in writing. I would love to see a system where you had 3 or 4 teachers team teaching, in classes, able to spend time doing further education, so that it's this continuous way of learning, or promoting your own interests, creating a better society through that, whether it be writing or maths, or physiotherapy, so that you are not flat out exhausted, like a lot of primary and secondary teachers that I see, that are holding on for holidays... I know that may sound a little bit utopian, to have 3 or 4 teachers per class, some the junior [teachers], or whatever, we have a few examples of it at the school where I'm teaching where we're able to do a little bit of team teaching and it's the best fun, I think we learn well in groups, off each other, and of course not only that, the learning we're getting back off the students, as we watch them in their groups is amazing as well... (Patrick)*

Patrick is evoking a Freirean perspective on learning and teaching, one which involves both students and teachers in a cyclical learning experience, placing the learning of both student and teacher centrally in a democratising process. From a Freirean perspective, teaching is about agency and leadership. A teacher must be constantly developing their critical consciousness: their insight and understanding of the global world around them and the local worlds they, their students, and communities inhabit. Patrick is reflecting the ways in which the present system works against the development of teachers' own agency as learners, and therefore inevitably undermines genuine, democratic student-teacher collaboration.

Participants spoke both of their commitment to deeply respectful and inclusive dialogue and action, but also about the decreasing space for such practice in their everyday lives and work.

*...over the last 5 year's that I've been [at my primary school, it]... is very much the same, completely constricted more and more every year, so I get angrier and angrier every year, because I have no time, no space at all, and even with progressive stuff that's supposed to be building the thinking skills and the critical, you know you can be beaten over the head with all of that as well, rather than actually, because in the end education is all about having the time to think, and that's what's disappearing completely, and so in a sense it sort of connects to my*

*idea about communities and families being involved, is that you still need that time and space, they need the time and space to be involved and you need the time and space where you can relax, or where you can have parents coming in, or you can wander off and do this or that, and you have flexibility and you're not having to contemplate the legal ramifications of everything, and so on and so forth, so it's all about, in the end for me, the ability to breathe and to think, and to just be able to sit around and talk, and that has to be the foundation (Jock).*

Primary school teacher Jock has put the ability, through time and space, to foster meaningful relationships with his students and their families at the heart of his vision for 'engagement' or partnering. In another conversation he argued for an approach to engagement and the development of relationships that put teachers, and ultimately students in the centre, drawing on the Finnish education system to make his point.

*I was thinking about ... all the discussions around the Finnish model and some of the things that have come out of that, I really like listening to. Cos I think a lot of it, just looking at the role of the teacher and so forth, I find if curriculum was much more localised, so the teacher had vastly more say, that's a key for me, the other one I've already referred to is the idea of time, and space, so that a foundation for community engagement is the fact that students are no longer students, but they're extensions of their community, and so you actually have lots of time just to bring that, they bring their community into the door and it becomes part of the life, not... rather than rhetorically, but really, cos all this stuff takes time, and then that becomes the foundation hopefully of community engagement through the actual kids (Jock).*

Through Jock's and others' comments a picture starts to materialise, one of solidarity emerging out of resistance and autonomy, inspired by the potentialities of building authentically democratic relationships. While for many of the participants their imagining bore little to no resemblance to their actual experiences of educational practice, Bruce, with over four decades of experience in secondary and then higher education, shared stories that evoked such values and priorities. He spoke of the changes he had witnessed throughout his career, lamenting the loss of resources and autonomy to be able to "dream up" locally-devised engagement activities.

*... I was lucky enough to be in a system where as a teacher I got time release funded by the government, to go and dream about the purposes of education, for a western suburban school that was struggling with a lot of things, now how the hell, economically, did that operate? Well it did, but under a very different political and economical paradigm... I hate to keep harking back to the 1970s, but when [our school] was undergoing this transformation one of the things we kind of dreamed up, was having parent liaison officers and community liaison officers, when there was more money around to employ people, to come in, and not tell the community what they needed but to actually go and listen to the community. And*

*we had a Greek parents group, we had a Maltese parents group, we had an Italian parents group, we didn't have a skip parents group, I guess they were on the school council, but it was the start of this big question, you know, "multiculturalism", and the big dialogues that we are still having. And there were these wonderful ethnic nights that were devised, Greek dancing, or whatever, and there were nights when all the communities got together so it wasn't just separate, but they were learning about each other and they were learning about their communities, and the parents were having a chance to come and... a lot of the Greek and Italian, Maltese parents had very low levels of education, and they were coming into a school and I guess they felt welcomed, and could say what they thought, and often in their own language (Bruce).*

Bruce's comments bear witness to the neoliberal drift away from any values not couched in terms of market and accumulation. To many of the younger roundtable participants his comments seemed alien and far-fetched even in terms of their wildest aspirations and visions. The following comment from Lily describes her frustration at parents who "don't want good things for other people's children", and captures just how deeply the question of market advantage has permeated schooling and attitudes to education.

*... when my brain tries to be optimistic rather than pessimistic about that, I think ok so how do I force these people to want good things for other children?! And so I just think that at a very basic level that goes back to when we look at how people do overcome racist attitudes etc. it's often when they hear the stories and live amongst people who they previously would have judged. So I think for me that's the answer! It's listening to other people and then wanting good things for other people. But how do we create those conditions so that people can hear and listen (Lily).*

## **Partnerships as resistance**

*...you've gotta always see yourself as a teacher and an activist doing whatever is possible within your capacity to change things... in the classroom it's our pedagogy and what we do, and it's about seeing yourself as an agent within that, within that social change and seeing your students as agents of that also... (Pablo).*

In discussing resistance and educational activism in partnerships, what the conversations revealed was that by and large the roundtable participants appeared quite hesitant to describe in detail how and when they viewed themselves as 'resisting the system'. Generally speaking, all three of the discussions focused around a lack of space to do very much and the perceived reasons for this. However through the dialogue

around the challenges of being an activist under Neoliberalism, the groups did move on to more general consideration of what spaces exist for meaningful action and engagement as forms of resistance against the system.

For example one participant had been working regularly as a casual relief teacher in the same school, and felt that had freed him from the heavy administrative workload his colleagues faced but gave him an opportunity to foster relationships with students, partly based on his and their collective responses to the setting as ‘outsiders’, (the regular teachers and leadership being insiders).

*I really talk to these kids about this, I'm like “do you think it's fair, do you want to wear a uniform? No, 'cause they're always complaining that the “teachers at this school care more about our uniform than they do about our education.” So I use little things like that to bring up and question the whole structure of school and say to these students “are schools democratic places, do you have a say in your uniform?” “No.” “Do you have a say in what time school starts?” “No.” “Do you have a say in what subjects you do?” All of these types of things and ideally this is how education should be run where everyone who is affected, everyone has a say and they have the power to make a decision about their education (Pablo).*

Bruce, the former secondary school teacher now teacher-educator who had been working in various sectors in the Education system for several decades reflected further on his experiences in the 1970s in schools in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, where the whole region was essentially considered “alternative” with wide ranging scope to innovate, and even government funding provided to undertake research around the teacher-led innovation. Again, this proved inconceivable for most other participants of his roundtable. Rachel's account, discussed earlier, of her inner-west school's campaign to resist amalgamation into a proposed ‘super-school’ with several others in the area, and the way in which the school community was perceived to have “*held the line... all together... and resisted the region*<sup>12</sup>”.

These examples were presented as anomalies and exceptions in a general environment of lack of support from principals, or worse, active intervention from the principals with regional and governmental backing against the expressed wishes of the teaching staff, and in some cases broader school community (assuming the broader community gets a chance to determine/define what their expressed wishes are in any case).

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to the local regional branch of the government education department.

Central to the participants' problematising of the possibilities for resistance was an expressed frustration with a 'democracy' that is 'templated', and a sense that somehow even in ostensibly 'democratic spaces' you can't do anything outside of rigid and presupposed frameworks. Some participants explained how this is manifest in the broader effectiveness agenda, through pressure for the 'right answer', that is a measureable, quantifiable and easily implemented answer. Others evoked a Freirean critique of the concept of power in teaching and learning, and the need to challenge hierarchies of knowledge in education, instead being comfortable with "I don't know". The point they were making was that such a context is antithetical to genuinely open, democratic and problem-solving resistance, that has as its objective, empowerment through self-determination and locally-developed 'right answers'.

*...we mentioned trust, and power, and relationships, and border crossing. One of the things I like is the element of "I don't know!" because again that gives you that space, and usually that's when the thinking starts to happen, "I don't know! We're sitting here, we all have some experiences to share, but we don't know!" And that's where we invite each other and keep on pushing ourselves along whatever path we decide that we invest meaning in (Sophia).*

*...that's where to me, as an outsider from the whole university.., the whole research thing is ideal because to me, because that's what research is, it's "I don't know", but I'm going to find out. And I need your help to find out and that's how you build communities around I don't know, to me that should be the function of a university. But that's an outsider's point of view (Michael).*

Resistance was problematised in part, as imagining and fighting for spaces for real decision-making and autonomous, meaningful action. Secondary School teacher Patrick's earlier comments about the lack of real opportunities for teachers to remain engaged in active learning, in meaningful, broad and creatively approached professional development, were deeply connected to his under confidence in resisting neoliberal education. In many senses, the comments of Patrick and others were reflections on learning for all as an integral foundation to collaboration in education for public good.

Another point raised was the problem of formalised partnerships and engagement processes being too rigidly determined, too pre-set if you like, and also the issue of a range of things being thrown around as if they are already reality (free education for one, shared perspectives being another), already fixed. However, as Sophia reflected, they are not.

*...And then we had the free, secular education act exactly 140 years ago where we said to working class kids in Victoria, you come and sit in our schools and we'll make it free so you can come, and yet we've never really had free education. So all these things that we just throw around that aren't social realities yet around education. But I think that kind of, fact, you know that education is actually experimental, that it's just people and community, it's not... you can't describe or proscribe those processes, they actually have to happen (Sophia).*

## **Democratic spaces and systemic change**

Another key theme referenced throughout each of the three roundtables was the question of navigating the balance between localised grassroots agitation (“close the classroom door and do what you like/can”) and larger-scale, collective anti-systemic struggle (social movements and policy intervention). Participants often expressed a sense of ‘either/or’ reflecting a false dichotomy Kincheloe (2007, p. 11) described as

*...either when teachers view the classroom as the central if not only domain for critical pedagogical analysis and action or when cultural workers see schools as “lost places” where nothing matters because the institution is flawed.*

The following comments from Nathan, Jock and Rachel are examples of the kinds of ways this issue was presented and grappled with.

*...I suppose I get my personal fruit from going and doing that stuff with the kids, and the small picture helps me, because you know, the big picture you guys paint is fantastically eloquent, and you know I absolutely agree with it, but I find it a bit overwhelming for me... (Nathan)*

*...all this stuff reflects, the idea of educational reform external of social reform is a nonsense. It has to be an extension of the political, of general social reform. All we can do is maintain things and do little bits and pieces and build stuff in the hope that things will shift and we'll be in a position to take rapid advantage of it, but in the end you can't have these little sorts of things in the middle of the horror... (Jock)*

*I feel that you carve out spaces to do that... a few years ago... [somebody's] PhD was looking at VELS and how neoliberal all the ideas within VELS were, and I kept saying, oh but you just shut the door and do what you want! But he didn't see that as a valid analysis because he was interested in the structural, which I can understand that maybe that is where change needs to occur, but for me, and I guess this is my anarchist background, you kind of just do what you can at the grassroots and that you just spread that as much as you can, and that the more people are doing that and carving out those spaces, for me, that actually has*

*greater potential for change, than to try and combat it at a systemic level (Rachel).*

A particularly animated dialogue between Pablo, self-described anarchist secondary teacher, and Sue, parent and community educator, captured the complexity of marrying resistance with visions and strategies.

*I think while we perhaps want to completely get rid of the existing system and replace it with something new, while that's not possible, it's our role to use whatever space we can to agitate for change... I think it was John Gatto, who's got that saying that you're constantly throwing sand into the machine... (Pablo)*

*That's not good enough as a parent (Sue).*

*Why not? (Pablo)*

*'Cause we subject our kids to years of this system that occasionally has a good teacher, and in the meantime they're losing their critique and they're losing their self confidence and they're getting a barrow full of crap that unless you home school, I have found it very difficult to know... I think, that's good [throwing sand] but it's not enough for me (Sue).*

*What exactly is not enough (Pablo)?*

*To have, to work within, I mean to put sand in the system is good, but to work just within your own classroom is kind of like, yes, that's good, and I cherish the good teachers my kids have had, but it's not enough (Sue).*

Perhaps here we arrived at the nub of the dialogue. Reflected in the participants' conversation we have on the one hand the 'realistic' educator, enveloped by 'the horror' of both society and school, and on the other the 'utopian' community member/parent, who cannot understand why things can't be made better. Both are in fact the prisoners of a vacuum of social mobilisation, expressing in different ways the same frustrations. Both want change but neither can see a clear way forward.

*...the main, obvious, but unreal way [is] to make a social movement that's broad and progressive and powerful and everything will fall into place including education (Jock).*

*I feel like we need to challenge the actual purpose of education often because otherwise you're trying to find evidence based practice or research that demonstrates that this will actually contribute to outcome x which is actually not*

*what you might see as the preferred or most important outcome of the education, and you can't necessarily sell it because you can't justify.. do you know what I mean? So I sort of keep finding that, that I try and engage within the paradigm of the school and whatever I guess is the neoliberal curriculum that's being imposed, which actually has a different set of values and a different outcome, so I think that promoting that conversation which challenges that amongst parents and students and teachers is also something that we need to keep doing. And that seems like a huge hurdle but maybe you can only start by starting it (Rachel)?*

Jock and Rachel's comments suggest that a social change narrative is unavoidable even in the everyday of opening up spaces and democratic practice. Without "challenging the purpose of education" most practical efforts are likely to amount to very little. This situation is exactly what is being exploited by governments to harness community support against educators and push through further neoliberal reforms, often couched in terms of 'engagement' and making schools transparent to community.

Surely a 'joined-up emancipatory education - community activism' is possible?

Certainly many educators see themselves as both teachers and activists. A thorough exploration of such a possibility and its relevance for critical educational partnerships follows in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

In considering possible collaboration and action in and through education for public good and engaging in a collective critique of the ways in which space for counter-hegemonic practices does or might exist, the roundtable participants raised and explored significant questions. These included questions of agency and power to analyse the opportunities and blockers for partnerships that seek to empower 'partners' to enact substantive change rather than merely 'include' them in the existing flawed system.

Providing the next layer of the complex story of contemporary educational partnerships, the findings presented in this chapter build on the descriptive and critical discussion of Neoliberalism in education (presented in Chapter Five) to profile participants' imagined alternatives. These include, their aspirations for an education based on social justice where students are supported and fostered as proactive protagonists, and schools are posited as central to community democracy. The importance of hope and being (and

remaining) hopeful as progressive and radical educators emerged in an overall dialogical space characterised by solidarity and empathy despite the diversity of sectors, histories and experiences involved.

The data presented here revealed the participants' hopes and aspirations for an education measured not on individual success and commodity value, but on the ways in which it contributes to the development of individuals and communities' capacity to collectively meet their self-determined needs and goals. The very question of goal setting was problematised with a rejection of the corporatisation of community needs, and instead an argument made for the space and time required to collectively consider alternative, more humanistic, open-ended and not narrowly market determined needs. The concept of community itself was critiqued, with critical partnerships being seen as a potential starting point for exploring community/ies and their characteristics, features, challenges, needs - as opposed to being based in predetermined and commodified notions and an externally-templated democracy. Participants considered how critical partnerships that foster autonomy, agency and consciousness amongst partners (universities, schools and communities) might be developed, and the possibilities for an educational activism that encourages connections between local educational practice and broad political and social change.

Alongside the imagining, the conversations also demonstrated the difficulties involved in giving strategic voice and vision to the practices of resistance and protest that occur in the everyday of educational practice. Teachers and parents both demonstrated the frustrations, despair and lack of political vision that the actuality of neoliberal hegemony imposes. For what are we partnering? What values drive our involvement? What are the important things? Moreover, what are the connections between localised and fragmented activism and resistance and the bigger picture, global social change? How do we actually enact the 'act local, think global' mantra? And given the absolute hegemony of neoliberal corporate ideology, what role is there for activist educators in breaking such consensus – how to apply Freire's "ideological worker" role in practice?

In thinking through the perceived gaps and weaknesses, it becomes clear that they represent part of a broader ideological challenge facing the world at 'the end of history'. This recognition of the lack of political vision that might emerge from past historical

experience and engagement in other quarters of struggle was precisely what prompted an additional round of data collection, aimed at drawing directly on the ideas of political activists in education. This work is documented in Chapter Six which follows.

## **Chapter Six: Partnerships reimagined: lines of development for educational partnerships for social justice and community empowerment**

### **Introduction**

The data generated through the roundtable dialogues and presented in Chapters Four and Five provided rich, grassroots perspectives on everyday educational practice in the context of neoliberal hegemony. They also highlighted an overarching and critical challenge facing those interested in a liberatory, transformative educational activism:

how to turn defensive battles, where teachers, families and activists try to hold on to what remains of an education that values the 'public good', into offensive battles, driven by strategic vision and educational-political objectives aimed at the positive reconstruction of education as human learning and emancipation?

Although each participant proved themselves to be deeply committed to morally and ethically driven collaborative practice, and courageous enough to take action to resist the worst horrors of neoliberal education, their frustrations and lack of surety inevitably rang louder than any confident proclamations of 'what to do.' Rather their dialogue revealed a generalised lack of strategy for the practices of resistance and protest; depicting an opposition and subversion of existing neoliberal partnerships policy in education that is atomised and without a unifying narrative and vision of alternatives.

What the roundtable participants did highlight is the need for critical, anti-corporatist partnerships based on collaboration which privileges grassroots knowledge, solidarity, struggle and critical consciousness. Such an acknowledgement sharpened the question: how to contribute to a practice of such; how to draw on our struggles, past lessons, and inspiration, to develop strategic perspectives for community driven, subversive partnerships?

This chapter presents my attempts at thinking through the implications of the roundtable data, in the context of the literature review and in drawing on my own experiences of and aspirations for educational activism. In grappling with the aforementioned question, it was appropriate, indeed necessary to call on my fellow activists in the Popular Education Network Australia (PENA), who provided another layer of insight through

which to consider these now sharpened questions. Drawing heavily on the work of Freire and based on my own learning through the roundtables and my political and educational engagement with fellow activists in PENA, this chapter provides a theorised perspective on the potential of critical educational partnerships to contribute to a broader struggle for humanistic and emancipatory education for public good.

### **Interviews with education activists in PENA**

The three questions asked of the PENA activists were developed on the basis of the roundtable findings, and aimed at capturing perspectives on their existing and projected educational activism to inform the main question tackled here. They were also framed by my own context as an activist-educator, keen to answer the challenges posed by Michael Apple (2013a) and to further develop Gramsci's (1971) idea of the 'organic intellectual' which is arguably at the heart of Freire's work.

Given their existing commitment to educational activism and involvement in an organisation seeking to respond to the same challenges thrown up by the roundtable dialogues, the PENA members provided a critical voice/contribution at this stage of the process. Moreover inviting the PENA activists to engage in this manner constitutes an element of the validation process, responding to Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman's (1991) call for 'collective' research, and representing my commitment to a democratic research process which seeks to keep and put new knowledge in public hands, in this case at the service of PENA. The following chapter, while representative of my thinking alone, is both shaped by and hoping to inform the future activity of myself and others in PENA.

**Figure 3. Questions asked of the PENA activists.**

1. Why did you join PENA and what do you hope to achieve through your involvement in PENA? What objectives and hopes drive your involvement?

2. These are three quotes from my roundtable discussions:

*...I feel that you carve out spaces... somebody was looking at VELs... and how neoliberal all the ideas within VELs were, and I kept saying, oh but you just shut the door and do what you want! But he didn't see that as a valid analysis because he was interested in the structural... I can understand that maybe that is where change needs to occur, but for me, you kind of just do what you can at the grassroots and you just spread that as much as you can, and that the more people are doing that and carving out those spaces, for me, that actually has greater potential for change, than to try and combat it at a systemic level (teacher).*

*... you're constantly throwing sand into the machine, you've gotta always see yourself as a teacher and an activist doing whatever is possible within your capacity to change things, and definitely our major concern, on one level it is the broader structural things that need to be changed and then in the classroom it's our pedagogy and what we do, and it's about seeing yourself as an agent within that, within that social change and seeing your students as agents of that also (teacher).*

*...that's not enough, I mean to put sand in the system is good, but to work just within your own classroom is kind of like, yes, that's good, and I cherish the good teachers my kids have had, but it's not enough (parent).*

For many progressive and radical teachers/academics, the classroom is something like a haven for 'carving out spaces' for positive learning and exploring the possibilities of change and social alternatives. In your view how can this be resolved with the fact that social change is a 'global' problem? In what ways does this impact on your practice and what possibilities do you conceive for matching your aspirations for the classroom with those you have for global social change?

3. Paulo Freire considers educators as "ideological workers" who permanently face being drawn into teaching, apologising and modelling for capitalism. If we accept that, how do you see your role as a subversive, counter-ideological educator? What does Freire's notion of "concientization" mean to you?

In the first instance, asking PENA activists to reflect on their membership of the network provided a Freirean existential starting point: what motivates and inspires activist-educators? We established PENA in 2007 because

(a)s activists we were interested in the connection and linkages between critical education work and the revolutionary educational possibilities of learning in and with social movements, solidarity groups and activist communities (Ollis et al., 2012, p. 1).

In many ways PENA as an organisation was perceived of as precisely the sort of framework that could provide a think-tank for community driven partnerships. The questions asked of activists for this study highlighted a number of shared motivations: solidarity, collaboration, information and resource sharing and a collective engagement with ideas. A commitment to collectivising the task of understanding more deeply the political, social and economic realities of education under Neoliberalism, and developing a language (and practice) of possibility and hope, in order to better contribute to a justice-centred, democratic vision.

PENA was also described as a place for the conscious development of subversive practice, of pedagogical practice focused on social change. For some it is about sharpening our thinking to better enable us to engage with more mainstream and conservative ideas. For others it is about developing critical clarity and developing critical pedagogy as a consistent approach.

### **Partnerships, struggle and agency at the ‘end of history’**

This study has confirmed that neoliberal partnerships serve to foster the atomization of resistance and protest through their disempowering structures and hierarchies, and their fraudulent cooption of liberal ideas such as inclusion, community and justice. Such a context impedes the development of strategic clarity in developing and pursuing alternatives. In a more general historical sense, the lack of strategic vision can be understood as a product of the three or more decades of defeat and retreat of movements for social change and of organised resistance. After the ‘end of history’ and ‘death of communism’, under the banner of Neoliberalism, capitalism put an end to society, as Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed, thoroughly marginalising the ideas and values of collectivism and anti-capitalism. Through this, a rich history of knowledge and

experience arising from a century of socialist struggle has been buried along with so-called 'communism', and for that matter along with the liberal idea of progress and social democracy. As a result, secular radicalism has been left without a moral compass and strategic mission. In this context, the idea of a counter-hegemonic discourse has overwhelmingly been dissolved into a postmodern anti-discourse and those fighting for something better have been left to act within the ambit of a supposedly immutable capitalism and without a story "of a better world" to tell. To quote from Jameson (2003), "as someone once said, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."

However Paulo Freire most resolutely argued that collaboration and action in education needs to be aimed at understanding the world in order to change it. For him the *world* needed changing, not just the individual practice of teachers, and he never gave up on the idea of *fundamental* social change. Authentic "pedagogy of the oppressed" is necessarily and unavoidably the praxis of social change, rebellion and the imagining and construction of a better world. McLaren (2000, p. 169), arguing against a false dichotomy between a 'culturalist' and an 'economist' perspective in critical pedagogy, explains how

a Freirean pedagogy of liberation is totalizing without being dominating in that it always attends dialectically to the specific or local "act of knowing" as a political process that takes place in the larger conflictual arena of capitalist relations of exploitation..." (McLaren, 2000, p. 163).

While arguing that Freire's work is "unabashedly grounded in Marxist-Socialist thought...", Antonia Darder explains how "... for Freire, the struggle against economic domination could not be waged effectively without a humanising praxis that could both engage the complex phenomenon of class struggle and effectively foster the conditions for critical social agency among the masses" (Darder, 2009, p. 570). This can be contrasted with a disabling postmodernism, which Kelly, Cole and Hill (1999) argue leads to the denial of strategy or even the possibility of envisioning a better world and hence a better education, in any 'general' and 'fundamental' sense. Boggs described postmodernism as

...a fascination with indeterminacy, ambiguity and chaos easily support[ing] a drift toward cynicism and passivity; the subject becomes powerless to change either itself or society... endless (and often pointless) attempts to deconstruct texts and narratives readily become a façade behind which professional scholars justify

their own retreat from political commitment... the extreme postmodern assault on macro institutions severs the connections between critique and action” (Boggs, 1997, p. 767).

Without counter-hegemonic 'mission' or values, educational partnerships are likely to succumb to the integrationist role Neoliberalism prescribes. Postmodernist theories are likely to lead partnerships to liberal notions of self-empowerment, when what is required is the sort of ‘contraband pedagogy’ McLaren and Farahmandpur evoke, aimed at

... struggling and transforming the conditions that delimit the horizons of daily life and prohibit the acquisition of the material necessities that would enable a decent and just livelihood for all of the toilers in the world (2002, p. 267).

The corporatist strategy of neoliberal partnerships consciously excludes grassroots knowledge except to the extent that such knowledge feeds individuation. Such a process, although supportive of postmodern ‘critique’ and in turn fuelled by it, is unable to offer a pathway for an emancipatory process. The methodology of this study aimed, precisely, at breaking this culture of knowledge as individual opinion and input, rather encouraging knowledge as collective empowerment. The roundtable participants’ comments and indeed the practice/experience of the roundtable dialogues themselves, highlighted the dominance of corporatist language and values in all spheres of education, and exposed how limited any vocabulary of alternatives currently seems. The PENA educators, who have consciously chosen to explore counter-hegemonic methodologies and act anti-systemically, provided a critical framework for collective reflection, critique and the consideration of alternatives.

## **Partnerships as community praxis not neoliberal hegemony**

*Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world* (Paulo Freire, 1970, p. 106).

In drawing together the findings of this study, my own reflections and the PENA activists’ contributions, two broad points of consideration in thinking through the development of strategic perspectives for community driven, subversive partnerships are presented here.

1. For partnerships to be authentic expressions of community they cannot start from the point of view of enabling government policy but rather must be about subverting it.
2. Both the method and findings of this study suggest that some lines for the development of such an alternative partnerships discourse and vision can be drawn from the everyday experiences and battles of critical educators, parents and community activists engaged in education. These lines include:
  - i). Partnerships as struggle
  - ii). Partnerships as valuing 'folk' knowledge: sharing battle stories, 'memoria viva'
  - iii). Partnerships as solidarity: building solidarity across different levels of education institutions and the various 'subjects' engaged in educational communities.
  - iv). Partnerships as 'conscientização' (consciousness raising): placing a conscious and deliberate process of 'concientisation' at the heart of authentic community driven partnerships.
  - v). Partnerships as collective dreaming

Presented as benign but powerful, progressive but 'responsible', neoliberal partnerships are viewed as "semi-autonomous organizational vehicles through which governmental, private, voluntary and community sector actors engage in the process of debating, deliberating and delivering public policy at the regional and local level" (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002 cited in Skelcher, Mathur, & Smith, 2005, p. 575). The neoliberal approach in partnerships avoids any discussion of power and social conflict, except as historically de-situated difference and diversity; concurrently, the roundtable participants' reflected this same fragmentation, a disempowered and atomized community subject.

The data generated through this study reflects how while government, educational institutions and corporate interests have a unified and universalist (market-centered)

agenda, the community subject is atomised and without universalist propositions or frameworks. As Miraftab (2004, p. 89) argues, the literature on partnerships "has not examined the power relations and the influence of the environments within which partnerships are implemented". Institutionally-driven partnerships in education, where the agenda is set by neoliberal government and the corporate lobby, ensure that "the interests of the community are often overwhelmed by those of the most powerful member of the partnership" (p.89); in the case of education, this means partnerships ensure and extend the neoliberal hegemony. In effect, to use Miraftab's descriptor, acting as 'trojan horses' for Neoliberalism.

It follows that for partnerships to be authentic expressions of community they cannot start from the point of view of enabling government policy but rather must be about subverting it. In a neoliberal world, all practice must be deliberately, consistently and coherently subversive in order to be authentic. This is a fundamental tenet of the Freirean approach; if you do not know the world that needs changing, then you do not know the world. In short, the educator must become educated – in the Freirean sense – to understand the inseparable link between knowledge and transformative practice (praxis). Education and social praxis become a dialectical unity.

In the neoliberal context, proclaimed objectives of inclusion, those that entice educators to take on partnership activity, are a form of corporatism; creating frustration and building illusion and disillusion. As Freire (1970) himself explained, words that cannot realise constructive, meaningful action – where educational actors are “deprived of their dimension of action” (p.68) – are reduced to a benign *verbalism*. At the same time, actions “emphasised exclusively to the detriment of reflection” (p.69) are converted into action for action’s sake.

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanely, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection (Freire, 1970, p.69).

Freire’s reflection on the disempowering effect of “false words” echoes the problem of facing off against the partnerships rhetoric of Third Way Neoliberalism. Instead of

providing a way out, the dominant partnerships discourse offers, as Louw (2001, p. 97) argues, a ““false” reconciliation of social contradictions, that is, reconciliations serving the interests of the hegemonically dominant”. This is counter posed to an educational process understood not as a mechanism by which people are coerced into adapting to the existing learning environment, but as a total process of self-empowerment and education as advocated by Freire. Such a process was alluded to by the PENA participants.

*I am inspired by Paulo Freire’s ‘education as a practice of freedom’, the creation of a language of possibility for a democratic education... I am always looking for the social justice angle, if you like, one which can embed a practice of a possibility of broader social change in education (Sally).*

*I hope PENA can become a place that contributes to the development of a justice-centred, democratic vision of education, where pedagogical practice is focused on social change (Azlan).*

*I also feel compelled to try and teach students every available lesson to place them in a position where, rather than being unskilled, and therefore potentially thrown on the scrap-heap early in the current decline of capitalism they, would have the opportunity to fight for themselves (Finn).*

A Freirean perspective explains how authentic social inclusion is only possible as and through a struggle against those socio-political structures that restrict participation in the whole human enterprise and atomise society, in a word, capitalism. In problematising educational activity, Freire argues for a process fundamentally rooted in the existential realisation of oppression (conscientisation) as the starting point for humanistic social practice. Any ‘engagement’ not based on this is ‘false’ and misleading.

In its desire to create an ideal model of the “good man” [sic], a naively conceived humanism often overlooks the concrete, existential, present situation of real people. Authentic humanism, in Pierre Furter’s words, “consists in permitting the emergence of the awareness of our full humanity, as a condition and as an obligation, as a situation and as a project” (Furter, 1966, as cited in Freire, 1970, p.74-75).

Without naming and subverting oppression and exploitation, and making this the guiding content, community engagement becomes deception and in existential terms - alienation. In considering Freire’s contribution to critical pedagogy, McLaren (2000) explains that

Freire believed that the challenge of transforming schools should be directed at overcoming socioeconomic injustice linked to the political and economic structures of society. Thus, any attempt at school reform that claims to be inspired by Freire but that is only concerned with social patterns of representation, interpretation, or communication, and that does not connect these patterns to redistributive measures and structures that reinforce such patterns, exempts itself from the most important insights of Freire's work (p.163).

In agreement with McLaren it is argued here that the fundamentally political content of Freire's pedagogy must be recaptured and reaffirmed as foundation for avoiding 'false solutions' in engagement and partnerships. It is this revolutionary aspect of Freire's work which has long been under-emphasised, or removed altogether by many progressive educational theorists who claim to be influenced by his work. On this, McLaren is explicit when discussing the removal of the political content and analysis inherent in Freire's writings.

... the figure of Paulo Freire has been domesticated by liberals, progressives, and pseudo-Freireans who have tried incessantly to claim his legacy and teachings... Hence it is necessary to re-possess Freire from those contemporary revisionists who would reduce him to the *grand seigneur* of classroom dialogue and would antisepitically excise the corporeal force of history from his pedagogical practices (McLaren, 2000, p.xxii).

Such revisionists who wish to

...limit (Freire's) legacy to its contribution to consciousness-raising... (and who are) often victims of a subjectivism that occurs when people verbally denounce social injustice but leave intact the existing structures of society.... (Freire was) unwavering in (his) view that education and cultural processes aimed at liberation do not succeed by freeing people from their chains, but by preparing them collectively to free themselves (p.192-193).

According to McLaren, such a distorted use of Freire's work has the opposite effect, as it is used to "...camouflage existing capitalist social relations under a plethora of eirenic proclamations and classroom strategies. Real socialist alternatives are nowhere to be found..." (McLaren, 2000, pg. xxv). Giroux also reflects on this

What has been lost in this analysis is Freire's legacy of revolutionary politics. For Freire, *problem solving education* suggests not a methodology but a social theory whose aim is the liberation of individuals and groups as historical subjects through a critical educational process that involves making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical (H. Giroux, 2000, p. 148).

Neoliberalism turns partnership and engagement policies into a dead end, and worse still a trap for well meaning, liberal minded, educators. Goals in educational policy have to be set *apart from* market priorities, and established *above* these market priorities in order to subvert them. From a radical, Freirean perspective, any authentic community engagement in education needs to break from the market centred approach and provide other visions and concepts that could subvert the neoliberal intentions and objectives and produce a counter hegemonic practice. Here Freire's (1970) insistence on education as a partnership for fundamental social change, can form the basis for an alternative and essentially anti-capitalist approach.

The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people. Utilizing certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response – not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action (Freire, 1979, pg. 77).

The examples shared by the Roundtable participants demonstrated both continuing resistance to neoliberal 'engagement' and 'partnership' as well as the difficulties and limitations of local community-centred alternatives removed from the larger context and vision of anti-systemic struggles and social movements. As Freire points out, such frustrations do not finalise the process but simply open up new possibilities and challenges:

The "dialogical man" [sic] is critical and knows that although it is within the power of humans to create and transform, in a concrete situation of alienation individuals may be impaired in the use of that power. Far from destroying his faith in the people, however, this possibility strikes him as a challenge to which he must respond. He is convinced that the power to create and transform, even when thwarted in concrete situations, tends to be reborn. And that rebirth can occur – not gratuitously, but in and through the struggle for liberation – in the supersedence of slave labor by emancipated labor which gives zest for life. Without this faith in people, dialogue is a farce which inevitably degenerates into paternalistic manipulation (Freire, 1970, pg. 72).

Neoliberalism has entered a period of crisis, signalled by the economic events since and including the global financial crisis in 2008. In this context, and in the absence of any coherent emancipatory ideological perspective, social democracy has re-invented itself as a less economic form of Neoliberalism, rooted in the sociology of liberalism without hope; as explained earlier, so vividly reflected in the work of intellectuals such

as Giddens (Cammack, 2007). This trend contributes not a discourse of liberation but a “New Paternalism” (MacGregor, 1999). What we might call an ideology of the new paternalism lays the basis for partnership work that is carried out either with an explicitly deprecatory approach or worse, a thinly veiled, false benevolence. As Freire (1970) explains “if the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious” (pg. 73) and moreover, that “(to) glorify democracy and to silence the people is a farce; to discourse on humanism and to negate people is a lie” (pg. 72).

An important starting point for the development of authentic community driven partnerships is a rejection of the sociology of social-capital and its 'new paternalism'. PENA was very much formed in recognition of activists wanting not a language of social capital – one that only disguises the relationships of dominance and exploitation that turn education into conformity and productivity – but rather a language of and for rebellion. The PENA activists emphasised the importance of subverting neoliberal hegemony. For example Sally spoke of creating a “*language of resistance and possibility of change... [for] work[ing] in solidarity with one another*” and Azlan, of working with others who “*consciously, deliberately and energetically aim to develop a subversive practice.*” Sarah explained how through PENA she hoped to be “*...part of a push against Neoliberalism.*” Michael saw PENA as “*a group of people interested and committed to promoting the sort of radical and systemic changes I believe we need to make.*” Theo responded directly to Freire.

*Well, yes, a simple answer is for me (us) not to teach, apologise or model capitalism but actively reveal that there are alternative frameworks for social and economic being. So as Freire pointed out, we have to be ideological and be up-front that all of our actions are ideological, we carry ideology with us especially as educators and we need to be honest with our students and co-educators about the positions we hold. This is not easy as the usual response is rejection by other educators and resistance from students (Theo).*

Theo is elaborating on Freire’s fundamental point, that there can be no agency proper if it is at the whim and mercy of bureaucratic benevolence or worse still if it becomes an aspect of the corporatist strategy of co-option and demobilisation of opposition. The formation and activities of PENA constitute my and others’ attempts to continue to define and cultivate practices which can contribute to the development of such counter-hegemonic partnership approach in education.

## **Developing critical education partnerships for social transformation**

It is apparent from the roundtable and PENA conversations, that activist-educators currently exist in a context of atomised opposition to Neoliberalism and that no 'models' can substitute for the necessity of a language and vision of education as liberation borne out of mass and united struggle. The current climate stands in contrast to the period of the 1960s and 1970s, when the emergence of various social and political movements, notably the rebellions that characterised politics in Latin America throughout those decades, included those which first engendered and nourished the ideas of Freire.

Such a language and strategy of education as liberation cannot be intellectually conjured up. However this study, constituting a deep and rigorous analysis of existing research and theorising, and a dialogical engagement with educators and community members involved in varying degrees in partnerships, and in educational and political activism, has helped evolve some 'general lines' for discussion and deliberation of such strategy. Both the method and findings of this study have pointed to important and valuable elements of a critical partnership practice that require further thought and development, and are to date under-theorised and/or absent from the literature. In particular the following five are considered critical:

### **Partnerships as struggle**

It might appear obvious but in the context of a historically demobilised subject, the centrality of struggle needs re-emphasis. Present forms of partnerships in education are rarely connected with broader campaigns and movements, and rarely seen as vehicles through which to engage in struggle. Rather, they are often a means amongst others by which to coopt and redirect (undermine) opposition and resistance in a pre-determined, closed-off and 'safe' institutional framework.

The practice of activist-educators must constantly look towards rooting itself in the daily battles of teachers, students and their families, to counteract the potential for succumbing to apologism for the system or engaging in disconnected postmodern story-telling (Kelly et al., 1999). Moreover such struggle must be realised through de-

institutional and/or anti-institutional practice, a point many of the PENA activists made in describing the network as a critical space not bound by the limitations (both bureaucratic and ideological) of their professional frameworks. Anna explained how

*(t)he fact that PENA was completely outside the realms of employment was also immensely appealing as critical thought and challenges to the system can be quickly shut down in a work place (Anna).*

Neoliberal partnerships are inherently institutionally-bound, but for activist-educators involved in educational partnerships a conscious outward focus and a deliberate linking with activist struggles in and outside of formal education is critical. The PENA members emphasised the importance of looking to and learning from (and with) any and every campaign and movement, or practical expression of resistance. Concrete examples raised included the global Occupy movement and local and national student campaigns against increased fees and budget cuts. Academic Theo emphasised the importance of participating in local battles for specific resources and spaces, both to resist such attacks and as a means to ensure rebellious practices can continue.

Teacher activists Isabella and Finn emphasised the links between trade union and professional issues for educators, viewing PENA as a means to politicize teacher unionism and make connections between struggles over wages and conditions and conservative attacks on curriculum and pedagogy. Radical pedagogy requires union power and vice versa, and teacher unionism affects the learning conditions of students and the political culture they experience. PENA is seen to provide a space to explore a collective understanding of these connections.

The union activity of educators raises important questions about what might be the necessary 'points of agreement' and shared objectives that can drive or at least animate real community driven partnerships in the first instance. It is in the range of battles and struggles that issues and shared aspirations may be found from which partnerships will grow.

### **Partnerships as valuing 'folk' knowledge: sharing battle stories, 'memoria viva'**

Emerging clearly from the roundtables and expanded by the PENA activists, was the importance of and value in sharing 'battle stories', or what is referred to by activists and

intellectuals in Spanish as *memoria viva* ('living memory'). The exigencies of Neoliberalism see current partnerships mostly existing and acting as fleeting, disconnected and fragmented experiences, with little to no time or space for history to be learnt, applied and reflected upon. Rarely are the actual experiences and histories of 'partners' emphasized as fundamental to meaning-making and/or to determining the purpose and organisation of the partnership. However the idea of partnerships being seen as collaborative and active vehicles for the valuing and growing of a collective 'living memory' points to their potential as counter-systemic practice in the bigger task of developing alternative visions and realities to Neoliberalism.

Beyond the actual time and space constraints explored earlier in this thesis, the difficulty of such an approach presents as an obvious challenge given the destruction of so much tradition and history of social movements and struggle in the course of the neoliberal era. The collective recounting of memories that has emerged out of decades of post-dictatorship movements in Latin America, stands as a counter example, and highlights the importance of emphasising historical memory among new campaigns and struggles. A plethora of websites, blogs, networks and writing projects have appeared over the last few decades with the purpose of recapturing, documenting and sharing a 'people's history' under the banner of *memoria viva*. Arguably the centrality of such for the development of vision and strategy in emancipatory education has been a theoretical aspect of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed since its origins. *Memoria viva* is philosophically bound up with Aristotle's idea that memory "gives access to knowledge" (Lefebvre, 2000, p. 351), and is central to creating a living argument for an emancipatory practice of education. Without a history of struggle, agency is reduced to the utopian. Without historical memory educational practice will tend to be reduced to a pragmatic approach.

PENA member Azlan described his views on the practical significance of *memoria viva*.

*For me the key is constantly striving to connect the everyday classroom experience and content with the history and dynamics of global society and the communities and practices of resistance and rebellion... Part of this is getting students to think both in terms of concrete historical analysis as well as encouraging the 'utopian' thinking that flows from a 'morality of social justice' (Azlan).*

In Fals-Borda and Anisur Rahman (1991), Fals-Borda emphasises the importance of a critical recovery of history in research, and speaks of the “effort to discover selectively, through collective memory, those elements of the past which have proved useful in the defense of the interests of exploited classes and which may be applied to the present struggles to increase conscientization” (p. 8). Both Freire and Fals-Borda emphasise the point that the present cannot be understood without understanding the past, and yet partnerships in education are often presented as organisational fixes which can be seamlessly transferred, dropped-in, applied in any circumstance, at any time. Any meaningful collaboration with an expectation for action and change must be grounded in a collectivised history.

*Memoria viva* also reflects or rather mirrors Apple’s call for educators to actively resist the collective memory loss that Neoliberalism relies on, arguing that ‘counter-hegemonic struggles must be able to connect with popular memory, with the residual idea that there is more than just one way to structure social life, where social exclusion is not a daily reality’ (Apple, 2013a, p. 105). Neoliberal partnerships are thoroughly constrained with goals and objectives that explicitly maintain the status-quo, rather than practical means (frameworks) to imagine, reimagine and articulate alternative visions. Moreover, Apple’s own career is surely testimony to the need to tell stories over and over for as long as they need to be told.

In practical terms *memoria viva* signposts the need for educational activists to make time to dialogue and share battle stories, document and discuss the histories of radical and progressive struggles both inside and outside of education, as a critical rather than optional element of developing a counter-hegemonic partnership practice. The PENA activists shared their views on how local dialogue and experience must be connected to and linked with the histories and practices of global struggle. They described how classrooms must be utilized to make sense of students’ real experiences, their lives, their struggles, their family histories and their hopes and values. Schoolteacher Anna talked about incorporating themes of “*democracy, racism, diversity and creating change*” to deepen students’ understanding of their own experiences.

*The vast majority of the students I have taught over the past few years are from refugee backgrounds. Most of the students have been born and raised in refugee camps and have never set foot on their homeland. Because of their age and the complexity of the conflict their families have fled from, many have limited*

*understanding about the reasons why their lives have turned out the way they have... I see [them] as 'global citizens' - with roots in one country, raised in another, now living in Australia with relatives in countries around the world, speaking English as their second, third or fourth language. I am hopeful that what goes in the classroom may have world-wide potential as the students have an immediate and personal reference point for complex ideas and concepts and many are eager to work with others who have had or are having similar experiences to themselves (Anna).*

Finn emphasized the need for teachers to bring the context of the outside world into their classrooms, arguing that once connections are made between and across students' experiences then global consequences are revealed.

The interest and necessity described by all of the PENA activists in locating their educational activism in a broader emancipatory project resonates deeply with Freire's problem-posing education.

Problem-posing education is revolutionary futurity. Hence it is prophetic (and, as such, hopeful). Hence, it corresponds to the historical nature of humankind. Hence, it affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future. Hence, it identifies with the movement which engages people as beings aware of their incompleteness – an historical movement which has its point of departure its Subject and its objective (Paulo Freire, 1970, p. 65).

Here Freire adds further weight to the calls for a conscious commitment to the development of *memoria viva*, as he affirms the idea of education as a subversive 'historical movement'. Critical partnerships must be firmly located and valued as central to this broader, subversive and historical movement/agenda.

**Partnerships as solidarity: building solidarity across different levels of education institutions and the various 'subjects' engaged in educational communities.**

For Freire, educational engagement is fundamentally about, or marked by, the notion of solidarity. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he emphasised dialogue and solidarity as the basis for cooperation for change (1970, chapter 4). Darder (2011) discusses Freire's vision for democratic, participatory alliances where "...progressive teachers can participate in counterhegemonic political projects that do not dichotomize their work as

cultural workers and social activists” (p.155-156) and “where a solidarity of differences is cultivated, [where] teachers from diverse communities and class positions can work together to create unifying, albeit heterogeneous and multifaceted, anti-capitalist political strategies to counter conservative efforts to destroy public schooling” (p.156).

Both Freire's and Darder's points about solidarity align closely with the PENA members' aspirations for an antidote to the alienation and isolation felt and expressed by them as radical activist educators. The academic members spoke of the pressures of the corporatised education world and the ways in which they foster segregation and encourage complacency, as the example from Sally below shows.

*[activism] is hard in an academy where practices are managerialist competitive and where schools are in 'competition' with one another...although there are pockets of progressive practice, it is incredibly easy to become isolated... Therefore, [it is] so necessary to develop PENA as a solidarity and social change network where people can collaborate, debrief and share information about how they work within and against the neoliberal discourses of education (Sally).*

The PENA members spoke about the need to build alliances that bring people together around social justice, generating dialogue about how to solve problems and facilitating collective action. Such alliances must challenge the hierarchies in/of education and democratize and politicize our relationships with each other, our students and parents. And they should inspire; as schoolteacher Ally explained “*through [her] involvement in PENA, [she] want[s] to be inspired to continue to 'fight the good fight'.*”

This is not to deny the difficulties of such Freirean practice, especially in the context of relative mass political passivity - most radical educators are often forced back into the classroom as a haven for discussion, further separating them from community. At a time when governments are attempting to harness community support against educators and push through further neoliberal education reforms, often couched in terms of ‘engagement’ and on the basis of making schools more transparent to ‘the community’, precisely the opposite is required.

The challenge of fostering solidarity in and through the myriad of activities labelled partnerships and engagement presently is extremely difficult despite the ‘inclusive’ rhetoric that Neoliberalism ascribes. The examples of alliances between parents,

families, communities, teachers and schools, organised on the basis of joint action and collective questioning of values and priorities, highlighted by both the PENA activists and also several of the roundtable participants, are critical. However as their own reflections on limitations and contradictions of such activity clarified, the ideology of new paternalism is likely to influence/shape alliances and collaboration where they do occur, without conscious counter-ideological perspectives. A fundamental tenet of Freirean philosophy is that "...to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects" (Freire, 1970 pg. 66). Under Neoliberalism 'solidarity' can be substituted or confused with 'engagement', where input passes off for democratic deliberation and accounting, rendering the disempowered community subjects voiceless. Freire's arguments again clarify the need for such collaboration and alliance-building to be conceived of and enacted as counter or anti-institution in practice, with the experiences, histories and voices of grassroots actors front and centre – that is, fundamental.

We simply cannot go to the labourers – urban or peasant – in the banking style, to give them "knowledge" or to impose upon them the model of the "good man" [sic] contained in a program whose content we have ourselves organised. Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account (except as mere objects of their actions) the men-in-a-situation to whom their program was ostensibly directed (Freire, 1970, pg. 75).

Freire was explicit in his belief that "political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore, action *with* the oppressed" (1970, pg. 48). He emphasised that revolutionary change required leaders but that those leaders must act in solidarity and never consider leading *for* the people. Rather "the oppressed and the leaders are equally the Subjects of revolutionary action" (pg. 110) and that "(t)his truth.. must become radically consequential; that is, the leaders must *incarnate* it, through communion with the people" (pg.111). This is fundamentally relevant to those wishing to develop educational collaboration for liberation, and posits a challenge for educators to foster a dialogical process involving "subjects who meet to name the world in order to transform it" (pg.148).

What are the implications of this for educational partnerships? What does Freire's 'dialogical process' look like and what exactly constitutes 'communion with the people'? A constant theme to emerge out of the roundtables was the idea of listening

and talking – a rejection of the hierarchical, paternalistic and patronising (deficit-thinking) nature of much of the relationships they had experienced in educational partnerships. But neither is the kind of solidarity required an amorphous, fireside conversation. Freire is explicit about the sort of leadership which is compatible with a consistent emancipatory practice.

...the correct method for a revolutionary leadership to employ in the task of liberation is therefore, *not* “libertarian propaganda.” Nor can the leadership merely “implant” in the oppressed a belief in freedom...The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own *conscientização* (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

It follows that leadership cannot be seen to be neutral, rather, as Darder (2013) describes, it must constitute a “deep commitment in theory and practice” (p. u), to struggle in a manner that

opens the way for honest questioning, open expression of voices, multiple forms of participation, and genuine structures of democratic decision making, guided by a moral imperative and solidarity that is inextricably tied to the potential consequences of policy decisions and practices upon the most disenfranchised (p. p).

Although Freire stresses the centrality of dialogue, and of “(c)operation, as a characteristic of dialogical action” (1970, p. 149), he in no way suggests that dialogue alone is sufficient. As McLaren (2000) has pointed out, for Freire, education is always directive.

Freire emphatically did not relegate the role of the teacher to that of a ‘guide on the side’ or backstage ‘facilitator’ who moves forever sideways, slipping out of his or her responsibility to actively direct the pedagogical process. His was not a sidwinder pedagogy but rather cobra-like, mobbing back and forth and striking quickly when the students’ conditioning was broken down enough so that alternative views could be presented (pg.151).

Freire recognized that “(t)he challenge is not only to recognise the historical limits placed on agents but also to realise that it is possible to push those limits and the conditions that constrain them” (pg. 154). In fact it is difficult to conceive of any emancipatory ‘partnering’ practice emerging without some individuals ‘pushing the limits’. He spoke about not being a “prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which reality is imprisoned” and stresses the problems with ‘fake’ or ‘naïve’ programs with

false or misleading, unattainable outcomes, for example those partnerships that claim to transform communities or guarantee participants' success with little to no understanding of their lived realities, history and desires.

It is argued here that any authentic idea of educational partnerships cannot avoid this critique. Otherwise, partnerships are reduced to co-option and incorporation, enveloped by the corporatism that has characterised the neoliberal state and policy. For Neoliberalism partnerships mean converting the citizen into consumer; the “state itself is now ‘marketised’” (Munck, 2005, p. 60). It is fundamental for any authentic partnerships to avoid Neoliberalism's invitation to be part of a hollowed out democracy, reduced to discourse without substance. Any ‘democracy’ where rational argument is separated from social power – economic and socio-political - presents a dead end for partnerships (Mouffe, 2000). On the contrary, community partnerships need to explore anti-systemic, conflict-based approaches aimed at fundamental social change (Hansen, 2008).

Such approaches are fundamentally about mobilising, uniting and organising a counter-hegemonic subject, where love and solidarity prevail over *competition*, which is otherwise the dominant ethos and condition of the market. Solidarity is essentially defined by the idea and act of supporting otherwise strangers but united by common economic and socio-political interests. As such solidarity necessarily entails and promotes trust, in fact forming the basis of trust on a social/community level. Without trust – as an expectation of the co-operation of others - the subject is demobilised. Forging and deepening such solidarity based on trust must be a fundamental task of critical partnerships.

**Partnerships as ‘conscientização’: placing a conscious and deliberate process of ‘concientization’ at the heart of authentic community driven partnerships.**

The community driven partnership does not come ready made; it does not flow from the logic of the market but rather can only emerge from a process of struggle and consciousness-raising; where communities elaborate objectives and strategies and find common cause. Freire's concept of *conscientização* is about finding a way to connect the immediate concerns of individuals to an emancipatory perspective that can both

encompass and transcend the immediate. This tension was expressed by both roundtable and PENA participants as they grappled with 'working with people where they are at', while trying to also transcend this. Comparing the individualistic 'aspirations' mantra of New Paternalism with a Freirean approach that centres around critiquing and abandoning identities rooted in oppression, and re-identifying (forming new identities) through critical consciousness, defining shared interests, alliance building and so on, enables a reactivation of "an examination of the dominant society and constitutes a shift in the form of agency, a movement from the social to the political..." (McLaren, 2000, pg. 157).

However, including among those who reject the 'hands-up' approach of New Paternalism, there is a lack of clarity in terms of a more political and strategic analysis of the situation, i.e. how do we explain a seeming lack of aspiration amongst certain young people? Attempting to further understand this question is critical to the building of authentic partnerships in education, particularly when neoliberal partnerships effectively whitewash the subject as a conscious and critical actor, instead urging an independence and participation based on narrowly conceived factors constrained by a predetermined and limited socio-political framework.

McLaren (2000) explains the process of disidentification and identification, as one through which Subjects study and understand the power relations that shape their current identities in order to consider their future identities, and that

Faced with the internalisation of hegemonic rules and regulations that cleaves the individual subject, Freire's method involves the ejection of the introjected subject positions of dominant groups (p.157).

Fiercely critical of Neoliberalism, in particular its ideological hegemony, McLaren (2000) stresses that "Freire perceived a major ideological tension to be situated in the ability of people to retain a concept of the political beyond a reified consumer identity constructed from the panoply of market logics and their demotic discourses" (pg.152). The response to such demotic discourses and their attempts at preventing people from naming the world, involved

...linking the categories of history, politics, economics, and class to the concepts of culture and power, [whereby] Freire managed to develop both a language of critique and a language of hope that work conjointly and dialectically and that have proven successful in helping generations of disenfranchised peoples to

liberate themselves at a time in which the critical questions linked to these categories have been formalized out of existence by education officials (McLaren, 2000, pg. 155).

The New Paternalism seeks to saturate engagement/partnership initiatives with the ideology of individualistic ‘aspiration’ but cannot successfully drown all learning and community partnering in such, fundamentally because the aspirations have nowhere to go. This creates the critical space for intervention and the possibility of a counter-ideology based on the Freirean idea of identifying oppression and encouraging a critical consciousness, constituting a "shift in the form of agency” (McLaren, 2000, pg. 157).

For critical partnerships viewed as a subversive and transformative practice, this first stage - the radicalisation of the individual subject - engenders the opportunity and need for collective action: the moment of engagement. The actuality of engagement then turns to the possible, what each community can bring - large or small into the struggle for social change. Subversion of the capitalist hegemony becomes the compass for engagement and collective solidarity, and hope the spirit that fuels every action and conversation.

For the PENA activists there was understandably a tangle of the concrete possibilities for action and the hope of alternatives and perspectives for change, for example Sally’s comment that Freire’s discussion of a “*conscious and profound awakening of our own and others’ humanity*” in part inspired her activism within her everyday practice as an academic. The hope and the consciousness of something different among PENA activists reflects the necessity of conscientização as a starting point dialectically linked to the practices and actuality of opposition, resistance and struggle. Conscientização is here understood not as a watered down, co-opted version of empowerment but rather as a political act: the realisation of rebellion as the only meaningful agency.

### **Partnerships as collective dreaming**

The actuality of resistance, struggle and activist pedagogy necessarily inspires collectivism and images of a better future. This existential dreaming – rooted in real life collective struggle – is the fuel of Freire’s *pedagogy of the oppressed* (Paulo Freire, 1970; P. Freire & Freire, 2007). Ultimately this is the message that the PENA activists

emphasised in the discussion. Che Guevara and later the student and worker uprising in Paris in May-June 1968, popularised the slogan “Seamos realistas y hagamos lo imposible” or “let’s be realistic and do the impossible!” The slogan is a reflection of the reality that social change does not emerge from blueprints but rather out of the invariably chaotic but also energetically cooperative resistance of ordinary people. The PENA activists reflected exactly this: their struggles armed not with blueprints but rather with the energy of resistance, rebellion and a solidarity that inspires dreams of liberation.

Neoliberal partnerships, promoting self-interest and competition, encapsulated in the idea of ‘aspiration’, can only suppress any dreaming of different potentialities and objectives. Neoliberal partnerships privilege individualistic aspirations based on fear and alienation rather than collective goals and hopes based on solidarity, trust and empathy. Rather than the progressive and innovative activities they are sold as, neoliberal partnerships at best offer a slightly better outcome in a flawed but inevitable system - and even then, only for a particular few at any one time, never for the local let alone global majority. By contrast, at the heart of Darder’s (2009) writing on the work of Paulo Freire is an optimistic urgency about the task at hand, as she reminds us

... Freire’s frequent response to questions about issues that perpetuate educational injustice was to challenge us to consider the nature of the limits we were confronting and how we might transcend these limitations in order to discover that beyond these situations, and in contradiction to them, lie *untested feasibilities* for personal, institutional, and socioeconomic restructuring (p. 571).

Perhaps ‘untested feasibilities’ best sums up the conversation with the PENA activists. Through their contributions emerged a clear rejection or counter-position to the pragmatism of social democracy and postmodernism, in other words there is no point stopping at the limits of the possible or imminent. Instead, the PENA activists drew (practical) guidance from the feasibility of the untested, the possibility of subverting hegemonies and opening new and grand avenues of resistance and liberation.

Critical partnerships for radical change and justice must, from the outset, be open to and celebrate collective dreaming and the opportunity to reimagine the universities we work and study in, the schools we teach in and/or attend and the communities in and of which we are a part.

## Conclusion

The integrative logic of neoliberal partnerships is both internally contradictory and subject to the global contradictions of capitalist development, invariably producing counter-forces expressed not only in economic crisis but more importantly resulting in inevitable struggle. This logic of struggle, sporadic and contradictory as it is, provides the basis for an alternative practice of partnerships directed against neoliberalism. Such struggles have elements of both spontaneity and deliberate design, working dialectically, and constantly battling the ideological hegemony of the market. In and through these battles, activist educators work against this hegemony, aiming to consciously promote the 'folk knowledge' of educational communities, and applying the methodology of 'conscientização' on collective and individual levels; leading in the development of critical consciousness. All of this is happening at a time when the ideological hegemony of capital is seemingly without global challenge, apparently omnipresent. Against this backdrop activist educators have no choice but to be dreamers and to promote such dreaming in and through all of their activity.

In Chapters Four and Five of this thesis it is argued that neoliberal partnerships in education more often than not serve to undermine and/or curtail the types of grassroots, cooperative, innovative and change-driven practices they ostensibly claim to be. This argument presented such reforms as being almost inevitably subsumed by the economic and political needs of the market despite being promoted as vehicles for equity, justice and social improvement. This study's participants shared experiences of partnerships that were at best frustrating, limited and confusing, and at worst mechanisms for maintaining and deepening an unjust and unequal system.

This chapter opened by asking how progressive and radical educator activists might conceive of partnership activity that could turn defensive battles against the neoliberal offensive in education, to offensive battles with strategic vision and emancipatory objectives. In other words, how might we perceive and enact partnerships and engagement in education as opportunities to exploit the cracks in neoliberal hegemony that Apple speaks of, and as examples of Freire's pedagogy for liberation? The sharp

critique of partnerships under Neoliberalism developed through Chapters Five and Six, as well as the developing analysis of potential resistance and alternatives provided the foundations for answering this question, in a way that is generally lacking in the existing research literature. Drawing on the thinking and experiences of fellow education activists in PENA brought a sense of realism and practicality to the question. The process resulted in the five points presented in this chapter, elaborated as useful starting lines for development in imagining critical partnerships as anti-systemic practice as part of a broader struggle against an inherently unjust and brutal global political system. Taken together, the five points offer a coherent and clear basis upon which to pursue such practice.

## Chapter Seven: The Bolivarian University and Misión Sucre, Caracas, Venezuela

### Introduction

This chapter presents research into university-community engagement and educational ‘partnering’ in Venezuela undertaken in the early stages of this study. While the Venezuelan case was not explored in the depth that was originally envisaged, as one of three original comparative case-study sites, the data presented here played a significant role in informing the study, its development and conceptualisation, and particularly in sharpening the critique presented in Chapter Two. In many ways, the data presented in this chapter book-ends the thesis in the sense that it reflects both initial thinking and questioning that informed both the objectives and theoretical explorations of this research, and also provided a constant framework of reference throughout the study for the further development of questions, and the theorisation of critical partnerships.

The radically different context of contemporary Venezuela and the example of The Bolivarian University of Venezuela (UBV) and associated social program Misión Sucre, offers a significant, contemporary counter-example to the Neoliberal partnerships model and is of particular significance to the contemporary context of educational reform and innovation in South and Latin America, and worldwide. The data is provided here not as a complete case study, but rather as a challenging and informative example with clear relevance for this study in terms of the potential of collaborative education for transformation. The examples of important experiences shared here highlight what can be achieved when struggle develops from spontaneous *reaction* to deliberate *pro-action*; where the activity of radical educators fuses with the mass action of communities, helping generalise "folk knowledge", deepening critical consciousness and opening up space for people to dream.

The UBV is described as an institution founded with social justice and equality at the core of all educational content and delivery (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación Universitaria (MPPEU), 2007; Muhr, 2009), and as a project central to the nationwide social reform taking place in Venezuela presently. Misión Sucre, with its specific focus on increased access to University and other post-compulsory education

for marginalised sectors of the community, is one of a number of social *missions* or programs seeking to redress historic inequality of opportunity in Venezuela primarily around the key social issues of education and health (Ministerio de Educacion y Deportes de Venezuela (MEDV), 2004; Muhr & Verger, 2006; A. Winter et al., 2005). Focusing on these two projects in an investigation into the educational reform currently taking place in the broader context of society-wide goals of social justice and equality in Venezuela, adds a relevant and challenging dimension to the analysis of our own and others' initiatives.

As Griffiths (2013, p. 105) has pointed out, the Venezuelan experience is uneven, contradictory and riddled with the problems of developing and sustaining leaderships that can persist despite being constantly undermined by internal and international oppositions to the Bolivarian process. However in a global context where things are getting worse for the majority rather than better, it remains an inspiring and important example.

### **The contemporary education context in Venezuela**

A visit to Venezuela in 2009 to investigate the nationwide educational reforms currently being implemented revealed similarly articulated goals to many of the initiatives being implemented here and globally under the umbrella of university-community engagement. In the first instance educational access, equity and success feature as key objectives of the reforms.

Established in 2003, *La Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Bolivarian University of Venezuela or UBV) is one aspect of the massive expansion to educational access that has resulted from more than 10 years of educational reform overseen by the current Venezuelan government, offering free places and no barriers to admission. Unprecedented public spending has supported the reform of the public education system and the establishment of a number of accompanying community education *Misiones* (Missions), which lie at the core of a broader nation-wide social inclusion agenda being led by the government and President Hugo Chávez (see for example Asamblea Nacional, 2008; Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación Universitaria (MPPEU), 2004; Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Educación Universitaria

(MPPEU), 2011).

The affirmation of education as free, obligatory and democratic and a fundamental human right through the Constitutional reforms of 2000 (see Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 2000; and the Organic Education Law (*Ley Orgánica de Educación*) República Bolivariana de Venezuela & Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela, passed in 2009 after extensive public debate), has underpinned significant increases in access to all sectors across education (Chávez, 2008, pp. 47-57), particularly for those communities traditionally excluded and marginalised groups: indigenous communities, the urban and rural poor and Venezuelans of African descent. Significant increases in education spending and the abolition of fees for public schools have supported increased participation in schooling. Primary school enrolments have almost reached 100% and between 1998 and 2007 secondary school enrolments increased from 27.4% to 50% (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2008).<sup>13</sup>

### **Access and equity**

Attempts to reverse historic and seemingly intractable patterns of poverty and social exclusion, through major reforms in education and health in particular, have required emphasis on an equitable redistribution of wealth aimed at increasing social, political and economic inclusion. Venezuela has eradicated illiteracy and seen hundreds of thousands achieve their primary and secondary school qualifications through the extensive rollout of the free, community based education programs known as education *misiones* (missions) focusing on literacy, school completion, workplace skilling and higher education (Muhr & Verger, 2006).

The basic classes of each mission are accompanied by an organisational structure that exists at the national, state and municipal levels. Each mission is distinct, but generally involves teaching staff and those considering pedagogy; logistics staff who coordinate venues, environments and equipment; financial staff who administer funding; and social staff who work with local communities to ensure students have adequate housing, healthcare, recreation and cultural facilities. Each mission involves a staff unit known as

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<sup>13</sup> For more general information on the perspectives and initiatives of the Chavez government in relation to education see (T. G. Griffiths, 2010)

*Atencion Laboral* which monitors the work situation of students and their families, working with local communities to establish cooperatives in agriculture and other sectors.

This approach has involved the identification and ongoing attempted removal of the key economic and social barriers to education, with all students at the missions and at the new universities provided with free tuition and materials, and a hot cooked meal each day. The Bolivarian universities have extensive student healthcare and support on campus with doctors, dentists, psychologists and counsellors available free of charge to all students, and to local communities as well. Despite these significant provisions and the increased attendance rates for all areas of education in Venezuela since their implementation, challenges and inconsistencies persist, with the example of student retention being one requiring further action.

## **Higher education in Venezuela**

Historically universities in Venezuela were strictly an option for the wealthy elite, with many Venezuelans excluded from basic primary education let alone the secondary level which could provide access to higher education. Increasing access to thousands of Venezuelans previously excluded was the first priority of the educational reforms. Higher Education enrolments have increased significantly since the 1990s. Between 1998 and 2007 the number of students enrolled in universities rose from 668,109 to 1,796,507 (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2008).

The UBV, whose Caracas campus is housed in an old PDVSA<sup>14</sup> building, is seen as a project aimed fundamentally at ‘de-elitising’ higher education in both form and content. *Misión Sucre* with its specific focus on increased access to university and other post-compulsory education for marginalised sectors of the community constitutes an alternative entry program to higher education, with classes taking place in universities,

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<sup>14</sup> PDVSA is an abbreviation for *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (Petroleum of Venezuela), the state-owned petroleum company in Venezuela. It is significant to note that PDVSA was brought under the full control of the Chavez government in 2003. While the company was formally under government control prior to 2003, an increasingly corporatised model of operation had seen a decreasing portion of revenue channelled back into public spending. Under Chavez, PDVSA revenue has financed the roll out of massive social programs, primarily in education and health.

schools, workplaces and community buildings in over 5000 *aldeas*, or educational villages, nationally.

In 2004 the then Ministry for Sports and Education (MEDV)<sup>15</sup> stated that Misión Sucre is “... an extra-ordinary plan, of a strategic nature (not fixed), that intentionally facilitates the incorporation and guarantees the continuation of studies in higher education” for all those previously excluded, as per the “constitutional mandate to guarantee the right to education” (2004, p. 65). Furthermore, the fundamental objective of Misión Sucre is presented as being to unify and coordinate the higher education system across Venezuela, through “the generation of new spaces and the creation of new modalities of conventional and non-conventional studies”, emphasising geographical connectedness, in every region of Venezuela, but with a global vision (p. 65-66).

The mission is facilitated through the establishment and expansion of the UBV, which has campuses across the country. Legislation has prohibited charging for public education, but Misión Sucre also offers around 100,000 scholarships each year to the most disadvantaged Venezuelans to further assist them undertaking post-secondary schooling. Although a complex and uneven process, it has been reported that the programs are being met with some success (Muhr and Verger, 2006).

The studies of every student at the UBV are grounded in community based problem-solving initiatives, or PEIC (Integral Educational Curriculum Projects)(T. G. Griffiths, 2010), in the area students live (Muhr & Verger, 2008, p. 82). In 2004, Maria Egilda Castellano, the founding rector of the UBV described the intention.

We devised what we call UBV-Community Technical Boards. Students, teachers, and the community came together in a dialogue to put the problems of these communities on the table, select those that are to be converted into projects for the students to undertake with the help of the community (Egilda Castellano, 2004, p. 54).

Teacher education and medical training have become largely community based, with interaction through direct partnerships between the UBV and local health and education

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<sup>15</sup> The Ministry for Sports and Education (Ministerio de Educacion y Deportes de Venezuela, MEDV) has since been restructured as two education ministries (Education, and University Education), and a separate Sports Ministry.

providers. As an example, Shah describes a project undertaken in 2005 where teams of medical and education students worked with a local community to identify and address a range of health and social issues arising from poor water quality (Shah, 2013). In 2006, the then Rector of the UBV, Andrés Eloy Ruiz noted the ongoing and uneven development of the projects and the key challenge of strengthening both faculty and student understanding of and commitment to the deeper philosophical and pedagogical objectives of the projects and their participatory action research approach (Gilbert, 2006).

### **Participatory Action Research as university-community engagement**

The distinctly Venezuelan version of the methodology known as Participatory Action Research (PAR) reflects an intersection between a number of community and popular education traditions in South America over the past 40 years. In a workshop in Caracas<sup>16</sup>, renowned educationalist and current Vice-Rector of the UBV Luis Bigott<sup>17</sup> discussed the historic development of the PAR methodology and its significance in the current context. He noted that the initial “popular education” movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reflected a move towards the massification of education largely motivated by the Industrial revolution, but also saw the rise of demands from the workers themselves. Later this movement intersected with the work and thoughts of a number of radical educators and community leaders across the continent who were developing community education strategies within the broader political struggles of the period. Bigott explained how Brazilian educator Paolo Freire<sup>18</sup> and others were influential in the Latin American popular education movement that arose internationally in the 60s and emphasised the emancipatory and transformative potential of education.

Bigott explained that all UBV students work alongside mentors in local communities on a locally developed problem-solving project as a fundamental part of their studies. The multidisciplinary PAR methodology they utilise, which aims to explicitly link theory

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<sup>16</sup> All workshops and interviews took place in Caracas in January 2009, as part of an organised academic exchange involving teachers, academics and students from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The interviews were transcribed and translated from Spanish by the author.

<sup>17</sup> At the time of the interview Luis Bigott was an Andean Parliament member. He is also a former Dean of Education at the Central University of Venezuela.

<sup>18</sup> Luis Bigott emphasised that he had the privilege of being both a student and then colleague of Paolo Freire.

and practice, is according to Bigott directly informed by the historic development of popular education conceptions in Venezuela. As examples, Community Health students work with doctors within the *Barrio Adentro* health mission which provides free, preventative healthcare to all Venezuelans, and Legal Studies students might establish a community legal centre to advise and support families with civil law issues. Education students work with a teacher in schools. Classes are held each evening with UBV students discussing theory linking back into and arising from their experiences in the project.

In a 2009 meeting at the UBV<sup>19</sup>, Carina Salazar the university's then National Director of Student Development, explained how the university is based on both political and academic objectives woven together by the fabric of a transformative education. Careers or the development of careers are not spoken of at the UBV, "instead we speak of programs, and program formation that is based on the general social project and the community project which characterises the nation."

Silio Sanchez<sup>20</sup>, the UBV's then National Coordinator of Legal Studies explained that historically in Venezuela, as throughout Latin America in general, the teaching of law was Euro-centric and effectively *adopted*, as opposed to even being *adapted* from, Roman law. According to Sanchez, at the UBV Legal Studies is taught from a multidisciplinary approach incorporating, among other things, Latin American political thought, judicial anthropology, indigenous legal systems and a class analysis of the penal system. For example, he explained, "when we discuss constitutional rights, which is a big discussion in law, it's not just the constitution that we're discussing, but in fact society, state and constitution, in its entire complexity. We are drawing on political science as much as sociology."

The teacher education course at the UBV explicitly refers to training new educators to take part in the broader social change process and promotes the development of student-centred learning in schools through students engaging with the community in local problem-solving projects. As Muhr and Verger note,

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<sup>19</sup> See note *n*.

<sup>20</sup> See note *n*.

(r)ather than subordinating and marginalizing knowledges and contents not directly exploitable in the capitalist economy, the fundamental principle of holistic and integral education expresses itself in the transdisciplinary nature of the UBV study programs (Muhr & Verger, 2008, p. 81).

### **Higher Education For All (HEFA) versus Social Inclusion**

The educational partnerships and reform in Venezuela taking place under the umbrella of the Higher Education For All (HEFA) program reveal fundamental differences to the social inclusion agenda as it is being adopted here in Australia. The HEFA agenda in Venezuela “rejects the globalised neoliberal higher education agenda of commoditisation, privatisation and elitism and reclaims education at all levels as a fundamental right” (Muhr, 2010, p. 40). HEFA is at the centre of the broader social, political and economic agenda of ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) which seeks to support the transformation of Latin American nations through the development of a regional union aimed at providing an alternative macro trading framework to Neoliberalism (Hattingh, 2008).

The role for education in such a macro policy agenda contains three key dimensions according to Muhr (2010):

- The quantitative (‘access for all’)
- The philosophical (the collective cultivation of a ‘new socialist ethics’)
- And the qualitative (an emphasis on the ‘social relevance’ of education) (p. 50).

Considering these three dimensions in relation to the UBV model as an example of university-community engagement is useful. The Venezuelan government’s commitment to the material bases of inclusion, via a comprehensively funded public schooling system, has long been argued for internationally as key to education for social justice, however is largely incompatible with the constraints of neoliberal imperatives. Many have exposed the myth of public and free education in Australia, noting that poverty is a significant barrier to participation and that cost-shifting under Neoliberalism has seen families paying more and more for basic schooling (see for example Bond & Horn, 2009). This can be contrasted with the infrastructure around the *misiones*, which are attempting to address students’, and their families’ health, work

situation, accommodation issues and community support as fundamental features of an inclusive education system.

The current global economic environment, more so than in the past, has influenced the shift of the relationship between higher education institutions and community to one that is essentially measured in terms of labour market value adding (Sunderland et al., 2004, p. 5). This is where Venezuela provides a distinct alternative. For example, whereas a recent ‘Social Inclusion’ agenda in Australia emphasised productivity and competitiveness (Gillard, 2007),

(t)he HEFA agenda puts higher education at the service of the entire society, rather than simply being a means of individual social mobility. This refers to the political, economic, social, cultural and ethical role of education in local, national and regional endogenous development and the construction of twenty-first century socialism (Muhr, 2010, p. 50).

Put simply, the reforms in Venezuela seek to measure education by its social value, not its *exchange* or market value. Educational partnerships are developed on the basis of a critical education for all designed to develop a citizenry ready and equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and disposition for active participation in the model of “protagonistic-participatory democracy” under construction (Egilda Castellano, 2004, p. 52).

The broader philosophical perspectives on the role of higher education in society as reflected through Misión Sucre and the UBV are explicitly documented in the 2009 Organic Education Law:

This Act establishes the principles of education, participatory democracy, social responsibility, equality among all citizens without discrimination of any kind, preparation and development for independence, freedom and emancipation, valuation and defense of sovereignty, the development of a culture for peace, social justice, respect for human rights, the practice of equity and inclusion, and sustainable development, the right to gender equality, strengthening national identity, loyalty to the homeland and Latin American and Caribbean integration (República Bolivariana de Venezuela & Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2009, p. 5).

The UBV project and its relationship to and with communities in Venezuela are at the centre of a nation-wide re-imagining of curriculum and pedagogy. Through Participatory Action Research, day-to-day decision-making and problem solving takes

place, aiming to realise the objectives of the community-based organisations. The UBV's model highlights the potential of a partnership approach that situates the university in the hands of the community or communities, within a social change framework that intends to subvert the persistent traditional hierarchies and power imbalances that educational partnerships face under Neoliberalism (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011a), particularly in terms of research objectives.

Neoliberalism sees research and learning by university students in the workplace and community (despite a diversity of intentions by those developing it in practice) often subsumed under human capital logic, and so ultimately tied to the economic imperatives of capital. Although education is still placed at the heart of social advancement in Australia, the context of Neoliberalism has seen the idea of social progress no longer presented as multifaceted, but rather singularly equated with economic growth, or more specifically, with private accumulation. While the objective of university-community engagement under HEFA is collective empowerment, partnerships activity under Neoliberalism is fundamentally about promoting individual social mobility and market positioning.

The example of the UBV suggests that Venezuela has incorporated a concept of work and community-based integrated learning, where the work environment is the very political struggle itself; the struggle for a fairer, more just Venezuela for all. The education reforms in Venezuela under the Chavez government have been explicitly underpinned by the values of democratic and participatory socialism. Muhr and Verger (2008) note that curriculum developments appear to be based around the empowerment of people to become active agents in a burgeoning participatory democracy. A 2004 document from the then Venezuelan Ministry of Education and Sport (MEDV)<sup>21</sup> notes that

Education is conceived from the perspective of fundamental human rights, within the framework of a process of the construction of a *social* democracy, a state based on justice and rights. The search for equality, towards the construction of social democracy, constitutes the principles and fundamental aims of all educative actions (MEDV, 2004, p. i).

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<sup>21</sup> See note *iv*.

This process is not without contradictions and tensions, as Griffiths (2010) notes

(a)side from the disjuncture between policy and practice, and particularly between the establishment of laws and their application and adherence to them by public and private institutions, any number of contradictory practices and tendencies may be found, alongside ongoing corruption and clientelismo... the prevalence of passive, transmission pedagogical practices; top-down and highly centralised governance structures and practices including the appointment (rather than election) of university authorities; high levels of casualisation of the academic workforce; and extremely high attrition rates accompanying... expanded enrolments in (HE)... (p.105)

In short, like any revolutionary process the pace, breadth, depth and success of changes and reforms is uneven and at times contradictory. Nevertheless, Venezuelan 'revolution in education' stands out as an important counter-example to the Neoliberal corporatisation of education.

### **The social purpose of education**

The social role or purpose of universities and their particular relationship to community/ies has generated debate for as long as universities themselves have existed. Here in Australia, amongst educationalists in particular, the social/community value of education, and educational institutions committed to and driven by social justice and community wellbeing has been strongly argued historically (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982). Universities are inescapably part of communities, local and global, and located within historically specific contexts which determine their relationships to these communities, and so such aspirations must be considered in terms of the major structural and policy challenges facing the university-community engagement approach under the current neoliberal agenda. Who has access to higher education and the nature of the education they access, has been primarily determined by the politico-economic and cultural framework of any given time in history. As Ponce (1993) suggests, education has historically played the role of developing the necessary level of labour skilling in any given socio-economic formation, with the educational institution tending to mirror the political-power relations of society at large and serving and preserving the ideological hegemony.

In Venezuela, a process through which the education system and indeed society as a whole are being re-imagined by the government and local communities is taking place, for example through the significant public consultations that took place during the development and introduction of the Organic Education Law. Aiming beyond social and economic inclusion, the process aspires to political inclusion, with educational decision-making increasingly in the hands of staff, students, parents and the community, through new modes of organisation and new legislation including the 2009 Organic Education Law (República Bolivariana de Venezuela & Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela).

### **Partnerships and engagement as permanent co-community development**

In the case of the UBV, the university's relationship to and with communities in Venezuela seems to be at the centre of a re-imagining of both pedagogy and curriculum, with education being constructed as a social good, and hence an end in and of itself, rather than solely an instrumental tool for developing human capital. Here it is suggested that the UBV and the educational missions constitute an effort to put educational reform at the heart of a new social agenda: orienting the national economy to meet educational needs based on community aspirations and community building, rather than reforming education to meet or adapt to micro and macro economic reforms centred on corporate profitability. Moreover, the education missions demonstrate an alternative partnership approach, as the education agenda becomes the responsibility of local communities, who themselves appear to be beginning to dictate goals, parameters and fields for further research.

In many ways, UBV and education in Venezuela more generally looks and sounds like the kind of “democratic, devolution revolution” Benson and Harkavy (2002) raised, and shares many characteristics with the critical partnerships this thesis is arguing for. At the very least it seems to offer a challenging and more politicised perspective in any re-envisioning of the notion of the ‘engaged university’. While a non or post-neoliberal context is not likely to be one we’ll be working within in Australia in the near future, the principles of university-community engagement as they are being developed currently in Venezuela provide relevant and inspiring possibilities for how we might

collectively reshape the agenda here, in the pursuit of collectively envisioned goals based on redefining who we are as human beings and how a more equitable and just world might be organised.

It has been argued in this thesis that university-community engagement perspectives and practices have largely failed to incorporate a critique of Neoliberalism. The case of Venezuela and the UBV presents as a tangible counter-example that is founded on such a critique, which in turn provides the spaces and opportunities for radical alternatives and action. The experiences presented here emphasise practices in partnership and engagement activity that foster and support the development of collectively envisioned (political and economic) alternatives and grow the capacity of communities to act to make those alternatives a reality. For us in Australia, an important part of that is looking to examples of collaboration and struggle in education and more broadly across the globe.

## Chapter Eight: Partnership as hope

### Introduction

In this thesis I sought to explore the possibilities for educational partnerships for social justice in a context of neoliberal hegemony. I aimed to shed light on the actual political, economic and ideological bases of the ‘partnerships/engagement’ agenda in education under Neoliberalism, with a view to generating both questions and new ideas for those wishing to consider how collaboration through and for education might contribute to breaking this neoliberal consensus.

This required a study that emphasised broad, deep and open-ended questions about the relationship between education and radical transformation of a deeply unjust world, the potential of a revolutionary critical pedagogy approach and the problems and challenges in enacting such a practice. Grounded in a commitment to dialogue and solidarity, it also required collaborative thinking and action, and as such looked to others grappling with similar questions to learn from and with them, drawing on voices and experiences of those directly involved in attempts to wrestle education back from the grip of the political-economy and cultural hegemony of Neoliberalism.

The experiences of and perspectives of fellow educators and activists were considered in the context of a thorough analysis and critique of the partnerships and engagement agenda as a neoliberal logic, offering an opportunity to contemplate the possibilities for counter-hegemonic practices. In asking parents, teachers, academics and community activists for their views on collaboration in education for social justice it became clear that they were all, in varying ways, grappling with the same bigger picture questions. They were wondering about how to carve out space for resistance, how to find ways to connect, and how to collectively imagine and enact alternatives in a system they saw as having failed.

Such discussions revealed a fundamental disconnect between grass roots knowledge and objectives and the present policy drivers of educational partnerships, as well as a generalised confusion and lack of clarity in terms of linking theory and practice in

critical and radical pedagogies. They also revealed a strong foundation of hope and solidarity that might form the basis for the actuality of rebellion and transformation.

### **Identifying an enemy**

Education fails the poor. Worse still it continues to contribute to their enslavement. And, as Galeano so vividly illustrated at the beginning of this thesis, the increasingly consumerist, corporatist and individualistic nature of education does very little to nourish and inspire the worlds of the “haves” either. With Neoliberalism still dominant, exaggerating further all the inherently individualistic and competitive tendencies and ethos of capitalism in general, success will continue to follow the rich kids and failure the poor ones. For those in between, the idea of learning to understand is increasingly replaced with the language of performance. The children of the middles classes and those who either presume themselves to be or aspire to be such, will provide fodder and justification for education reforms that aim to further transform education into a competitive market - making money from learning and turning knowledge into a commodity. Teachers too will be increasingly divided between those who hit targets and those who fail to. The corporatisation of the teaching profession is increasingly eroding traditions of teachers as cultural and intellectual leaders, instead churning out and promoting teachers who can ‘value-add’ to the student as commodity in the labour market. The idea of teachers who inspire inquiry and constructive rebellion will be left to another era. This counter-revolution in education will likely leave very few with the privilege of learning, or teaching, adding instead to the ranks of those the system considers failures.

Policy makers continue to talk up education as the key to a new post-crisis ‘Neoliberalism with a human face’, highlighting also the importance of education as a new key driver for profit accumulation. All such policy discussion is dressed up in the language of equity and access. We can agree on one thing: education *is* the key to a better world. But not education based on the exigencies and priorities of the market economy and narrowly thought of in terms of improving the market-position of individual learner-workers. No, education is the key if it is considered as a transformative, empowering and collaborative social practice at the heart of a permanent

process of redefining who we are as human beings and how a more equitable and fair world might be organised.

The current dominant partnerships agenda in education can be understood on a macro level to represent a means by which to expand educational marketisation and commercialisation by further promoting an aspirational culture as ideological justification, in the absence of any meaningful possibilities of social mobility. Despite the sharp critique it was in no way intended that this study appear as simply denigrating or belittling current partnership activity in education. Rather, as an activist educator committed to education as an emancipatory project, I wanted to contribute to our collective clarity around the now more-or-less complete co-option of *our* language (equity, access, justice) by the ideology of Neoliberalism, in order to better understand *what we can do*, where Apple's "cracks" (Apple, 2007) are to be found and exploited.

### **Partnerships and Neoliberalism: 'Untested feasibilities'**

It has been argued here that partnerships and engagement are an important strategy in guiding some of the main objectives of post-crisis neoliberal capitalism. Privatisation is enacted in a corporatist framework using all sorts of partnership mechanisms; from encouraging citizen share buys through to public inclusion in corporate governance structures. Neoliberalism emphasises the *social* in capital, aiming to commodify all things and relationships, including reducing aspirations to entrepreneurship alone. All this involves an increasingly strong state, including a growing regime of control and regulation in education, so as to maintain order in a system necessarily growing in social contradiction and crisis.

Bringing such an analysis to life, the roundtable participants provided a rich description of educational work/life under Neoliberalism, for the benefit of those interested in understanding better how we can fight back. Their lived experiences and indeed frustrations constituted important "folk-knowledge" (Fals-Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991) upon which to develop a more rigorous understanding of the political and ideological forces at play in the 'partnerships' we are enacting. Their conversations also

reconfirmed the value of dialogue in constructing meaning, at a time when so few such exchanges are possible/prioritised.

The data generated through the roundtables and e-interviews highlighted frustration and hope, cautiousness and rebelliousness and an important sense of the solidarity that could provide antidote to the fatalism bred by neoliberal triumphalism. The example of educational partnerships in the context of revolutionary social and educational change in Venezuela, opened a contemporary window on how resistance to oppression and exploitation can develop into processes that empower working people, give meaning and value to their histories and fertilise their dreams.

This thesis has drawn on the work and legacy of Paulo Freire and others who keep his words alive to consider these themes and develop a theorised response, highlighting some lines of development for authentic, community controlled educational partnerships in a time of neoliberal crisis.

### **Freirean ‘partnerships’: the dialectic of theory and practice**

The work and life example of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire continues to inform, influence and inspire educators and activists around the globe, with a spirit of contestation and engagement with the core ideas of his work. This thesis has explored some key tenets of a Freirean approach to education as social praxis, arguing their usefulness and relevance in considering alternative partnerships in education and in posing some counterhegemonic possibilities. Understood from outside its original context, a Freirean approach does not offer a model or program, but rather is valued as a social praxis offering an alternative vision, and strategic and tactical signposts to guide counterhegemonic activity in a neoliberal context. Fundamentally, such an approach is rooted in a profound humility and commitment to the liberation of not just a few mismatched kids who may improve their test scores or up their attendance rates, but the masses of young people and their families who are everyday relegated to a world void of agency and increasingly void of hope. As McLaren so beautifully puts it

Freirean educators do not conceive of their work as an antidote to today’s sociocultural ills and the declining level of ambition with respect to contemporary society’s commitment to democracy. Rather, their efforts are patiently directed at

creating counterhegemonic sites of political struggle, radically alternative epistemological frameworks, and adversarial interpretations and cultural practices, as well as advocacy domains for disenfranchised groups (2000, p.174-175).

The argument made by Paulo Freire and reaffirmed in this thesis is that any and all collaboration and action in education needs to be aimed at understanding the world in order to change it. A central and critical element of that is the need to educate and strengthen our individual and collective capacity to fight back against an inherently unjust system, and a recognition that partnerships need to be based on fuelling and nourishing such a process. Such partnerships will need to be developed on the basis of a privileging of grassroots knowledge, and grounded in solidarity, struggle and critical consciousness. Developing how these look and work needs to become a much more concerted area of work for educators. A 'joined-up emancipatory education - community activism' is surely possible and certainly necessary.

Based on this argument I have offered in this thesis five key lines of development for emphasis in future partnership activity:

- i) Partnerships as struggle
- ii) Partnerships as valuing 'folk' knowledge: sharing battle stories, 'memoria viva'
- iii) Partnerships as solidarity: building solidarity across different levels of education institutions and the various 'subjects' engaged in educational communities
- iv) Partnerships as 'conscientização': placing a conscious and deliberate process of 'conscientisation' at the heart of authentic community driven partnerships
- v) Partnerships as collective dreaming

Taken together these five propositions might act as a guide or compass for developing partnerships aimed at emancipation rather than integration. They are not presented as a policy program or blueprint, but rather as a contribution to the development of a theoretical compass for 'joined-up emancipatory education - community activism'.

This is a timely and important contribution because to date insufficient work has been done to suggest or bring meaning, purpose and direction to the vast array of well-

meaning and constructive partnership activity that occurs everyday. The work of valiant teachers, students, parents and others in attempting to wrestle some collective good from within the trenches of neoliberal partnerships, deserves serious theoretical attention. This thesis has attempted to redress this lack of existing scholarship. Furthermore this work is timely and important in and of itself as an example of the kind of work that must be done to imagine and act to realise alternatives to the inequalities and injustices exacerbated by the crises of contemporary capitalism.

In a fundamental sense, the challenge is not new: the need to avoid the dualistic approach to theory and practice and explore instead the concrete meaning and application of their dialectic. Any approach which is not consciously adhering to this principle, almost inevitably reduces scholarship to the role of the 'ivory tower', separate from reality and therefore impotent. Commonly, it reduces scholarship to a pragmatic apologism for hegemonic practices. In the context of this study it must be emphasised that such an approach leaves both academics and their 'subjects' engaged in the practice of partnerships, disarmed, or as Lukács describes it "naked",

The practical danger of every such dualism shows itself in the loss of any directive for action. As soon as you abandon the ground of reality that has been conquered and reconquered by dialectical materialism, as soon as you decide to remain on the 'natural' ground of existence, of the empirical in its stark, naked brutality, you create a gulf between the subject of an action and the milieu of the 'facts' in which the action unfolds so that they stand opposed to each other as harsh, irreconcilable principles. It then becomes impossible to impose the subjective will, wish or decision upon the facts or to discover in them any directive for action. A situation in which the 'facts' speak out unmistakably for or against a definite course of action has never existed, and neither can or will exist. The more conscientiously the facts are explored – in their isolation, i.e. in their unmediated relations – the less compellingly will they point in any one direction. It is self-evident that a merely subjective decision will be shattered by the pressure of uncomprehended facts acting automatically 'according to laws' (Lukács, 1919, section 5, para 10).

For Lukács, as with Freire, the essence of the dialectic of theory and practice is the "practical and critical" (Lukács, 1919, section 5, para 5) activity of the oppressed and exploited themselves. Meaningful partnership activity can only develop when participants are emerged in struggle: fighting, building solidarity, critically appraising their 'folk-knowledge' through a process of globalising their understanding (conscientização) and 'dreaming' of a better world. Through this complex and

contradictory process, a way forward may emerge, "out of the 'immediate, natural' life-principle" of the oppressed and exploited; through the "acquisition of total knowledge of reality from this one point of view [their own]" (Lukács, 1919, section 5, para 6).

## **Contribution and limitations**

It is my hope that this thesis has made a contribution to activists' understandings of neoliberal partnerships in Australia and globally, both in terms of the grassroots voices included, and the development of a critique of neoliberal hegemony in the engagement agenda. It is also my hope that this thesis adds weight to bigger arguments for an educational project that is firmly anchored in struggle, and which seeks to subvert and exploit any and all weaknesses in the neoliberal armoury, driving the development of alternative ideas and visions that reject wholesale the horror of global neoliberal capitalism today.

As such it might be of interest to those interested in education as a truly liberatory practice, in other words, all those not content with business as usual, and not deceived that this is as good as it gets, or can get. Moreover, it is hoped that this is of interest to all the progressive educators out there being sold a deception, and as a result deeply frustrated at the mismatch between their own ethically driven objectives and their ultimate incompatibility with neoliberal education. Perhaps they might engage with some of the ideas here, and join the conversation around what might help generate counter-hegemonic practices and emergent alternatives.

Finally it is hoped that this thesis sparks further conversation amongst activists about the role we play in education, what it means to be and enact Freire's "cultural worker", and how we can most effectively contribute to a collective process of liberation: a pedagogy of the oppressed. Much more research and thinking is required to develop our understanding of and practice in radical partnership activity in all its breadth and in terms of its potential.

The methodology of this study has given further weight to Freire's insistence that education is a deeply dialogical praxis, and that the answers to the kinds of questions we

are asking, demand an open and collaborative engagement. We cannot answer questions about social change and human agency outside this very agency, in its actuality.

Educators need to commit heart and soul to the struggles of those we want to 'educate'.

As Darder so powerfully argues

We must come to recognize more concretely that living a pedagogy of love is intimately linked to our deep personal commitments to enter into relationships of solidarity with our students, parents and colleagues that support our humanity - namely our existence as full subjects within our world. But it cannot stop there! A pedagogy of love must encompass a deep political commitment to social justice and economic democracy (Darder, 2002a, p. 89).

### **On Being A Critical Activist Educator**

Undertaking this thesis has provided the opportunity to further consider the why and how of being a radical, critical activist educator. Not only am I better armed theoretically in the battle against neoliberal hegemony, but I have a deepened understanding of the actual implications of policy in practice thanks to the contributions of the participants, my fellow teachers and activists. The critical need for a fundamental understanding of the political economy of education has become clearer. Without a clear perspective on the processes and contradictions of capital accumulation in late capitalism, our practice as educators can easily be reduced to blind benevolence or worse still, unintended collusion.

The urgency of continuing to build critique, and sharpening our opposition to the neoliberal agenda in and for education is clear. But this is not enough. We must continue to consider and imagine alternatives and we must test them out in practice. We cannot allow ourselves to be buried in fatalism or pragmatism. Exploring the partnerships agenda of neoliberalism and understanding the centrality it has in post-crisis policy-making - aimed as it is at bringing Neoliberalism 'into our homes' - has highlighted the importance of this counter-agenda. It could be argued that without a subversive and counter-hegemonic agenda in partnerships, we will likely have little hope in defeating Neoliberalism's renewed reform agenda; instead remaining cornered as teachers, unionists, parents and students fighting isolated battles, without a strategy that can forge the necessary alliances to fight back successfully.

We need to fight back together. This means our own partnerships agenda, developed out of the struggle and hopes of working people; struggling and acting together, collaborating, dialoguing and always looking outwards to connect our work with other struggles for justice and change. In the words of Antonia Darder (2008, p. para 4).

As Paulo Freire often reminded us, the struggle for empowerment must be both pedagogical and political. It requires a solidarity that is founded upon shared power, where differences and disagreements are not demonized or falsely contained, but rather welcomed as the fuel for creative learning about our place in the world. Such political grace, requires that we recognize that, no matter from where we enter the room, our labor as educators, researchers, and organizers must ultimately also be about saving our own lives.' For Freire, this meant a grace born from teaching and learning together, in ways that affirm our humanity, while yet, steadfastly, challenging the social and material conditions of alienation, greed, and dispossession. There is no question that this requires enormous patience, fortitude and wherewithal. However, it is also an approach that, in the long run, may leave communities more armed to contend with on-going and future issues and concerns of oppression - long after 'traveling' university educators, researchers, and placeless political organizers are long gone.

We can contribute to this process by opening every door with a promise of sunshine, and breaking down those we need to. This is as much about our own future as that of our students, our colleagues, our families, and our brothers and sisters around the world.

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## APPENDIX A

### Why I became a teacher activist<sup>22</sup>

#### Introduction

*As a teacher educator I talk a lot with my pre-service teachers about how their own experiences of life, education, politics and culture inform, shape and frame their actions and perspectives as learners and teachers. Heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, my teaching emphasises a dialogical, participatory and fundamentally social understanding of learning (Paulo Freire, 1970). So my students and I talk a lot. About life, about our own schooling, our own experiences.*

*It occurred to me recently, when I hit a brick wall in my PhD studies, that while generous in reflecting on my own schooling and my experiences as a teacher with my students, I had never taken the time to reflect on my experiences as a postgraduate learner and researcher, despite a semi-constant and semi-conscious disquiet.*

*Honestly, I kind of fell into postgraduate study not knowing what I was getting into. I also went in assuming it would be a one-time thing, and I'd return to teaching music and drama to secondary school students. Years later, having completed a Master of Education by research, I find myself struggling to balance a full workload in teacher education with completing a PhD.*

*Wondering about all this, led me to this reflection on the potential of education as a liberatory and transformative practice, in terms of my own professional and personal identity as critical activist-scholar. I begin way back at the start...*

#### The Beginning

*When I was a kid I was always keen to be nice, kind and fair. My parents imbued in me a strong sense of justice, and while I wasn't as brave as my little sister I did my fair share of challenging injustice. Most of all I tried really hard to be the best person I could be. Most of the time I fared OK.*

*I wanted to be a teacher. I loved the idea that I could make a difference, that I could be a part of people becoming the best people they could be. From the outset my ideas were about facilitating, empowering, supporting, learning with, rather than instructing or endowing others with knowledge.*

*I drew up worksheets and lesson plans. My siblings had to attend my classes. I used to take the roll. I corrected work madly, always with positive feedback. I had very clear ideas about which of my teachers were wonderful and which were appalling. In*

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<sup>22</sup> The text in this Appendix is an abridged version of an article titled *Why I Became a Teacher Activist* originally published as a chapter in (Ryan, 2012).

*retrospect I think they knew this level of critique was going on, as I was often called on to assume teacher assistant duties – such co-option readily accepted of course, in a manner and character not entirely inappropriate for, even rather reminiscent of, an irritating Disney sit-com. By and large, I really did enjoy school and was a happy, engaged learner.*

*Music was my thing, and the scary Disney sit-com reference might also resonate with my poor family who endured me singing and dancing my way through life, cabaret-style, for many years. Interestingly, my music education experiences were fraught. Never able to reach the mono-focused heights of my fellow music students, “under-practised and flippant”, I was frequently told that I was not reaching, and in fact may never reach, my potential as a musician. It was my favourite subject but it terrified me. A heavy emphasis on highly-abstracted theory, and formal and traditional curricular approaches just didn’t sit with my innate love of music. I got bored and my self-doubts flourished.*

*More generally, worries that neither I as an individual, or society as the sum total of us, were anywhere near being the best that we could be, saw me lose confidence as an adolescent, and my engagement waned. So much so that as a school-leaver I didn’t immediately accept a second-round offer into a music teaching degree. I was already happily enrolled into a Bachelor of Disability Studies, my third preference, and I thought I could focus on music therapy. Anyway, I still didn’t think I was good enough as a musician to teach music. A couple of days after I got the call from a prestigious University (not that I knew it was at the time), I followed my instincts and re-convinced myself that I was in fact born to teach (cue soundtrack) and that this was my real chance to be the best person I could be. It was my best chance to make a difference (the movie subheading).*

## **University**

*As the first in my family to attend university, and as a 17 year old leaving the country to study in a city, where I had to live with my ex-boyfriend’s flatmate’s cousins because I didn’t know anybody else, my first year of study was almost indescribably exhilarating. A move from mono-cultural Kangaroo Flat to brilliantly diverse Flemington/Brunswick/Coburg, then Footscray, was simultaneously confronting and exciting. Mad, chaotic, invariably filthy share-houses and late night gigs, strange new friends, foods and clothes. Nights in the deli or packing shelves at Coles Moonee Ponds, with the bulk of my earnings going on beer and vinyl. I learnt so much, soaking up new knowledge at every turn, everything from “Mum, these strange looking things called avocados are actually delicious!” to “Wow, not everyone is homophobic!” I failed a good chunk of my units, had multiple crises of confidence, shaved my head and almost didn’t re-enrol the next year.*

*While I spent the year unlearning how not to play the clarinet and feeling paralysed before each performance class, several of my lecturers opened my eyes to the creative potential of music education. Classes were full of critique – music education in schools is terrible! “Yes!” I cried, “it is!” So we experimented, we loved noise, we included, we composed, we explored and analysed music. It was wonderful stuff. I have fond memories of a contemporary music ensemble class where a mob of us wandered around the grounds of the University whacking objects randomly, creating the most fabulous percussive soundscapes, while onlookers, initially scoffing, ultimately and involuntarily tapped their toes as we found our groove. I also found myself extremely comfortable and capable in the classroom on teaching rounds and as an instrumental music teacher. I thought, Yes, this is a good place for me to be. This was definitely the correct decision.*

### **Politics**

*Then, I discovered activism. Or more accurately my sister discovered activism. While I was marginally hanging around the anti-up-front university fees campaign, my little sister was up in Canberra reading Marx and Lenin. I thought things were getting a little out of hand; it all sounded great but a little weird. Six months later I was a card-carrying member of the revolutionary left and the Victorian convenor of the campaign for a free East Timor and democratic Indonesia. I’ll never forget chairing a 30,000 strong rally and working with the Melbourne East Timorese community to build mass opposition to the Australian government’s cooperation with the Indonesian military. With the foundations of justice and equality our parents had given us, only partially understanding the world just didn’t seem like an option. The more I read, the more I was convinced of the potential to change the world, the more active I became in a range of movements and campaigns against war, for refugee rights, in solidarity with struggles and revolutions across the globe.*

*Experiencing the collective solidarity and optimism of mass actions and the intellectual and emotional challenges of democratic organising became the best teacher education I could ever engage in. I chaired rallies of thousands, MC’d public meetings of hundreds, and negotiated the complexities of student occupations and actions with police and media. I hosted radio shows, organised conferences and contested state and federal elections. What classroom was I not going to be able to handle after all that, I wondered?*

*Now, working in teacher education, I look back with frustration at how little I remember of my ‘education’ subjects, although I do remember my lecturers granting me generous extensions when my activity as an elected student representative got in the way of due dates. In hindsight I do believe they too felt that my political activity was directly relevant and beneficial to my teacher preparation, however disconnected it ultimately was. I remember raising meetings and rallies in class with fellow education students. I was disappointed at the lack of interest amongst my fellow student teachers. And while I was given assignment extensions and some liberties when I missed class on*

*account of being barricaded inside the administration building, I don't remember the deep learning I was experiencing around themes of democracy, social change and power translating into my thinking around schooling, pedagogy and curriculum. Not directly in any case, and not then, at that point in time. University was ultimately something I had to get through, a distraction from my life and all I was learning and achieving outside of the classroom.*

### **Becoming A Teacher**

*Five years later I finally graduated. I was more excited than ever to be a teacher. I'd been teaching instrumental music for years, developing, building and running programs and bands/choirs/orchestras, and was incredibly keen to get into the classroom and put my ideas to the test.*

*I got a one-term long service leave replacement job. At the ripe old age of 22 I was given three Year 7 and three Year 8 music classes at a prestigious and extremely well resourced public secondary school. I got the gig because the head of Music Education at my University highly recommended me to the school. The students were wonderful and we had so much fun. I remember they wrote some amazing raps about their school experiences. I still have a box full of lovely notes and cards they gave me when I left. I learnt during this time that I was good at developing trustworthy relationships with students, that I loved working with young people, and that I was effective in fostering an engaging learning environment. I learnt so much from the students, including that I had much to learn about teaching music "Best teacher ever", the students said, and while acknowledging the flippancy of youth, I took those words to heart and valued them enormously.*

*The school however, and more specifically my colleagues, appeared not to appreciate my dress sense (I never dressed inappropriately, just differently), my nose piercing (I asked if I shouldn't wear it, they said no of course, it's fine, ahem), my loud classrooms, my teaching methods, my choice of music. Me essentially. There was polite agreement at the end of the term that we were not a fit, and although there were other positions available at that time, it was felt best that perhaps I not consider applying. I was first year out, I laid fairly low, but the highly traditional and conservative nature of the school's music program and an elitist culture within the school in general, were I felt, antagonistic to even the most cautious innovation. I must note that turning up dreadfully hung over one day did not help either; that was a lesson learnt. I was grappling with professional responsibility and commitment, but in the absence of collegiality and without any agency or ownership over my own creative and pedagogical instincts.*

*The next two schools were fantastic experiences in different ways. I got to know students and colleagues, and was given room to move in the classroom – I could test out my ideas and got some amazing results. Students taught me so much. I learnt that they were not only capable but also very constructive and thoughtful providers of feedback on my*

*teaching methods and also on how they best learn. I spent hours and hours planning and then revising lesson plans and developing units. I built up music programs, increased participation and collaborated with colleagues to run bands, put on performances and raised the profile of the performing arts in schools. I was inspired by the students and felt really proud of their achievements and of my impact on their learning and experiences. These were steep learning curve years, learning about my own practices, identifying and articulating what I was just 'good at' (quite inexplicably), and what I had to work on and improve.*

*The schools were all different, enabling me to see first-hand the impact of such issues as resourcing, school leadership and the social and economic wealth or disadvantage of a school community, on student learning. Teaching music in a barely-renovated metal work room with no musical equipment was the best way to develop a unit on junk-music and the creativity of the group STOMP. What else were we going to do but find ways to make percussive grooves out of the big metal machinery carcasses in the centre of our music room? I learnt that high expectations and enthusiasm are infectious, and that even the most doubtful colleagues could come on board a new performing arts initiative if I smiled widely enough and threw in enough superlatives. Of course the beaming, proud students sharing their post-performance elation usually sealed the deal. I learnt so much from experienced colleagues who had remained as passionate about their jobs as they had been decades earlier when their careers began.*

*I learnt about how schools operate, got to know school processes and protocols. I developed opinions on what I thought was valid and valuable and challenged policies and assumptions I didn't agree with. I also learnt that the language and reality of schools doesn't connect with many young people's views of their own lives, particularly those from poor, working class families. I saw so much alienation and began to reflect on the disconnected layers of young people's lives. I saw contradictions between intentions and outcomes, with students being pushed away from school, let down by narrow and inadequate notions of success; a punitive, reactionary and largely patronising approach to relationships; and a primarily passive, disempowering student experience.*

*I was simultaneously inspired and buoyed and demoralised and disempowered by my experiences as a teacher. Again it was my activism that provided a framework for responding and turning my reflection into action.*

*Throughout this time my activism had continued, but outside of and removed from my work as a teacher. I was an active member of the union, and on my local branch committee, but was appalled by what I perceived as the undemocratic and apolitical nature of the union leadership's approach to membership. I was attracted to the ideas of a small activist grouping within the union, whose motions were not debated rigorously but rather, silenced and ridiculed on the rare occasions members were called to discuss campaigns or issues. This ran counter to the very values I had been*

*working hard to foster and nurture amongst my students in our classrooms, and in an education union no less.*

*I continued to be actively involved in the refugee rights movement, the free East Timor campaign and the anti-war movement. I remember being a little anxious bringing up issues in the staffroom. Although I was already (mostly) affectionately viewed as a young, idealistic, artsy type, political conversations were often met with indifference, cynicism or mockery. I remember being inspired a few years later by the whole school led campaign by an inner-north public high school to stop the deportation of a refugee student, and their subsequent collective fundraising to pay his fees as an international student. While I was supported in putting up World Refugee Day Posters at a school I was teaching at some years earlier, I felt it was seen as a tick-box, feel-good exercise. There was limited commitment to, or understanding of, how learning about and supporting the campaign for refugee rights might be a valuable educational experience and community strengthening exercise in a school with many second generation migrant families and increasing ethnic diversity. It was OK that I was keen though, because I was young.*

### **Parenthood**

*Then I had kids of my own! Two beautiful boys and that meant I took family leave. Parenthood stimulated renewed thinking about learning, and together with my activism, reinforced the importance of social engagement for learning. Becoming a mum only saw my sense of urgency to change the world increase. I remember featuring on an evening current affairs television program with my then 2 month old son at the May 1 protests in Melbourne's CBD, designed to shut down the stock exchange for a day in protest against corporate globalisation. When the reporter asked me how I could bring my young son to such a dangerous event, I boldly told him I felt safer with fellow citizens acting collectively, standing by their principles, demanding a better world, than I did almost anywhere else. Of course that didn't fit with the mainstream press' need for a violent and anarchic display, and so I'm pretty sure the quote was left on the editing room floor (movie casualty sadly). Years later, our sons have both attended a range of community actions and political demonstrations with us, discussed and debated the issues, met a diversity of people and engaged with a range of opinions, and most importantly joined with others in taking a stand. As a result I feel certain their developing 'world view' is more optimistic, humanistic and empathetic than many others, and that their strong sense of agency makes them better, and also intuitively cooperative, learners. Learning from and with my kids has deeply informed my teaching.*

### **Master Of Education**

*While enjoying time with my young son I kept thinking about the big teaching and learning questions that had developed throughout my initial teaching years; and having never considered it before, I decided to find out about postgraduate study. I approached*

*the university up the road with what I thought must have been a bizarre topic and wonderfully was awarded a scholarship to undertake a Master of Education.*

*As a busy mum of one, then two, young children, I was encouraged and supported to enrol in the MEd, and the flexibility of a highly self-directed program of study seemed perfect in many ways. I also enjoyed an empowering degree of autonomy over the development of the research question and methodological approach, which fuelled my passion for the topic and saw me engaged and excited about research.*

*I wanted to explore student attitudes to learning, student engagement. I wanted to understand the complex philosophical and ideological foundations of what I knew instinctively in relation to the disengagement I was seeing amongst my students in Melbourne's west. I also kept thinking back to a trip my partner and I had made to Cuba a year or two earlier, where I had been incredibly inspired by the young people I met, who in a number of ways contradicted the profile of my own students. We'd gone to Cuba to visit my partner's relatives who had fled there in exile from the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s. Through my interest in politics I knew a little about Cuba, but with the distorted information that is disseminated throughout the world about the small island nation, I expected that I had to go and find out for myself. It was an extraordinary experience. So my thesis ended up as a comparative study between student engagement in Cuba and Australia. My partner, one year old son and I spent 6 months living in Cuba, working with 14-16 year old Cuban youth, getting to know them, their lives and their schooling experiences.*

*The Master's thesis provided the opportunity to develop my understanding of the relationship between education and society and also to consider how schooling might be different. It also opened a door to a relationship with the university. I had chosen to undertake my postgraduate studies there as much on a philosophical basis – in appreciation of its commitment to learners in the west of Melbourne in all their diversity – as on a geographical and emotional basis, recognising that it formed part of my local community. Although over time I learnt that my piece of paper from the sandstone university was highly valued, my connection with that institution lived entirely through the friendships and networks I'd developed through activism, on many occasions activism that was directly related to challenging aspects of the institution itself – its elitism, its increasingly corporatised nature and its anti-democratic practices. This university seemed to me to represent something different. To the external observer at least, it projected an image that sat well with the beliefs I held and the value I placed on being a member of such a vibrant and diverse community as Melbourne's west.*

*That said, enrolment in a Masters by research meant that in reality I had limited interaction with the university community as a postgraduate student. I was quite isolated, most often working alone, albeit with strong supervisory support. I felt permanently pressured in my attempts to get the balance right between study and family. Most critically, I had to progress a significant and large study in a piece-meal*

*fashion, only ever managing small chunks of time and sound bites, as opposed to the sustained and sequential periods of time I felt others must surely have had. “Headspace is the issue!” I used to moan to anyone who listened. I undertook next to no coursework and so had to mostly self-manage a situation where, despite holding strong views about the topic and related issues, and with relatively strong writing skills, I was very inexperienced as an academic researcher. Aside from a few small and limited activities I had had very little to do with formal research in any setting. What was a literature review? How do I submit an ethics proposal? It proved another steep learning curve.*

*Concurrently I was trying to reconcile my developing understanding of what constituted ethical and rigorous research with my views on education and universities under capitalism. With an activist identity still at my core, I found myself asking: “In what ways was this extremely individual and private study likely or able to contribute to my aspirations for social change? What did I accept and what did I reject in terms of traditional academic conventions? What was the connection, if any, between my postgraduate research and my music and drama teaching? Was my community-learnt knowledge, through political activism and popular education forums, of value to me as a postgraduate student? If so, how?”*

*Undertaking fieldwork in Cuba and Melbourne, engaging deeply with questions of student engagement and participation, and developing a strong theoretical framework through which to understand and explain my views on teaching and learning, were deeply satisfying and rich learning experiences. My supervisors provided the counterbalance to the isolation and assisted at key moments to ensure I ended up with a coherent thesis. At the same time the Masters experience threw up a range of questions around teachers’ researching, around research and social change, and around education in times of neoliberal hegemony, that I felt I was only just beginning to engage with.*

### **Teacher Education**

*Despite a great love of what I do, and a passion to be better at doing it, I confess to not having thought much about who or what a teacher educator was, before I became one. I sort of stumbled into teacher education and apparently I am not alone in that.*

*While not anticipated by me at the time, the Master of Education enrolment led to sessional work in teacher education. I began teaching first and second year Bachelor of Education students in Cultural Studies and Policy and Civics Education, and absolutely loved every second of it! Back in the saddle, yes! The students were incredible, the content was engaging and inspiring, and I felt reinvigorated professionally by the spirited and passionate conversations we had each week. I was motivated by the openness of the pre-service teachers to new ideas and opinions and impressed at the collegial and respectful but honest and sharp discussions. Despite my initial anxiety, “Could I do this? Was I qualified to do this?”, I received some great feedback from*

*students and began to develop confidence in the units and lessons I was planning and facilitating. Once again, teaching felt the perfect fit.*

*Moreover, the teaching seemed to bring my thinking and learning as a postgraduate researcher back to earth and back to life. When appropriate I took the key dilemmas I was grappling with in my thesis into my pre-service teachers' classrooms and handed them over. Their engagement with my ideas, my questions, and also my hesitations and insecurities, helped to clarify things at critical moments, at times led me (us) in different directions and always strengthened my thinking. Teaching again saw my research begin to make a whole lot more sense. I thought about how lucky I was to have been offered some teaching work while studying, given the difference it had made to my scholarly engagement and, I felt, the quality of my research. I finally submitted my Masters thesis, all 60,000 words of it.*

### **Research Assistant**

*A year later I was approached to apply for a Research Assistant position in a new research and development initiative which had sought to improve the educational access and success of young people in post compulsory education and training, through collaborative research and partnerships across the region.*

*I was excited to get the job as I felt I shared such a commitment to the region, and that my experiences (which I rated very highly) of living, working and studying in the Western suburbs in a multi-lingual household, gave me a particular insight into the issues the project was hoping to investigate. My partner and I consciously chose to remain and raise our two children here in Footscray, and consequently our boys and their peers were among those with much at stake in the struggle this project was taking on – to redress the educational disadvantage and limited outcomes experienced by so many young people in the West.*

*I worked in the RA role for two years, and found it simultaneously inspiring and frustrating. On the one hand I was working as part of a passionate, collaborative, capable and creative team of colleagues who were working extremely energetically to put into practice the vision of mutually beneficial, locally relevant and respectful partnerships in education. I felt much of our work was significant in terms of school-university relationships and the development of school-driven innovation and problem-solving action. On the other hand, I became aware that the vision held by the project team was in key ways significantly different from the vision articulated by others in more senior roles in the university, which (understandably) appeared to be closely connected to and driven by broader institutional imperatives. Framed as they were in the wider context of the neoliberal agenda for higher education, these imperatives ran the significant risk of being antagonistic to the expressed needs of the schools and communities we were seeking to partner with. Moreover, some of the expectations dictated particular approaches and ways of partnering that challenged some of our*

*fundamental values and objectives. The complexity of the challenge was the only thing that was clear, and I became less sure of how we might challenge those imperatives and make the case for our vision for the practice of the project.*

*Well known education academic, Michael Apple, had visited Melbourne and the project team at that time, and one afternoon, when we had taken him for a coffee, I grilled him on the practicalities of his notion of the critical activist scholar (Apple, 2007b, 2011). He was inspiring, and extremely encouraging, but also wary. He emphasised the “bear witness to negativity” task, and I agreed – “Yes, we have to document and also speak out against injustice and give voice to those marginalised from mainstream discourse.” I wanted to hear more though, about the need to take our practical work seriously, and to consider it as much more than ameliorative work, but rather as a theoretical intervention, linking with activist movements and community struggles to collectively understand the impact of the neoliberal agenda on educational outcomes, and also to develop a new alternative agenda driven by community needs.*

*Through the RA position I was able to develop stronger professional relationships with colleagues and further develop my research skills. My mentor/boss encouraged me to apply for a funded PhD position which luckily I was offered. Originally I expressed interest in doing some work with Michael Apple’s critical activist scholar notion, as I’d been considering it in terms of my role, and our project work. Ultimately, the research was designed to closely connect to the project and aimed at exploring the perspectives and practices of university-school-community relationships for educational and social change and community empowerment. The study was framed as an international comparative investigation looking at the experiences of three distinct school-university partnerships, to develop an understanding of how relationships, practice and research have developed within the broader framework of university-community engagement, and in particular the possibilities and constraints present in the current neoliberal framework. In hindsight, the research topic ended up as a hybrid version of my original research interest meshed with the objectives of the university project.*

*Twelve months into my PhD, I took up a lecturer position in the School of Education. Even though I was still missing school teaching and my school students terribly, I was excited to finally be a ‘real’ staff member, able to really focus on and develop my work as a teacher educator, and to be a part of the inspiring work of colleagues.*

*However in an environmental context of chronic overwork and workplace stress, and with a combination of teaching, course coordination, administrative, research and other responsibilities, my PhD was often sidelined. Moreover, the commitment to be collegial and democratic meant that I had no choice but to be a part of a struggle to redress workload issues, both as a staff member and committed unionist.*

*A time of working out how I see myself as becoming an academic, I asked myself how the new job fitted with my view of myself, and of the world? How could I successfully combine being a parent, an academic, an activist and postgraduate student? More*

*fundamentally, did any of what I was doing matter? How did my own experiences of academia inform my views more generally of educational institutions under capitalism? What did all this have to do with my PhD? How would my PhD make a winkle of difference to any of it? My response, in part (as well as to throw myself into the challenge of being better at my job, teacher education), has been to add roles and activities to my workload, becoming part of Social Justice and Academic Workload Committees, collaborating with colleagues to strengthen our collective commitment to and understanding of social justice across our work, and to taking a united approach to a workloads crisis. I've also attempted to make links and connections with others from a number of universities, schools and community organisations with shared research interests and views on education and the world.*

*And so, today, here and now, a conversation with my Head of School around the formal staff professional development planning process has prompted some thinking. While I was speaking about work in micro terms, considering particular teaching outcomes and specific tasks for completion, he stopped me, and asked how exactly does one be the critical activist educator? It was wonderful to be asked. For me, I said, the question is how can I personally, and then collectively, contribute to a vision of a transformative and liberatory education? How can I contribute to a sharper critique of Neoliberalism's education agenda, and collaborate to articulate and develop confidence in alternatives? Action that gets co-opted or forced into the status quo agenda is ultimately ineffective in its objectives and extremely disempowering. How can a framework be developed that provides a multitude of critical initiatives with a space for counter-hegemonic practices? How can all of this occur in the environment of academia which is, as many have noted, alienating, individualised and increasingly competitive?*

*Despite feeling worn down, disconnected and stressed about my PhD research, this question, and the others that come from engaging with colleagues in a constant struggle to work out what we might do that matters, my PhD found new life. From its somewhat distorted origins in a compromised project, and without abandonment of the original big question, it has emerged as a living, breathing project to re-imagine education for public good. At a time when the cries of the global 99% are growing louder than they have in some time, thinking about education by, of and for the 99%, becomes not only important, but impossible for me not to do.*

*I'm always talking with my students about the critical importance of context and relevance for learning and of the centrality of the issue of agency. Turns out I am no different, as my learning is inspired, fuelled and fundamentally framed by the world around me and the struggles of peoples and ideas that make it. How I engage in these struggles – my agency – is what makes me the learner and teacher I am, and also what challenges me to continue to work on being the learner and teacher that I want to be.*