Metaphors as framing devices for social justice work in schools

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Social inequality is on the rise in many OECD nations and implicated in their education systems, often justified in elitist terms (Dorling 2011; Piketty 2014). This paper is interested in the metaphors for social justice mobilized by teachers in schools and the extent to which these challenge and/or contribute to elitist agendas. We understand metaphor as a framing device (Lakoff & Jonson 1980) that “at once conceals and is concealed” (Derrida 1974: 8). Metaphors render some ideas and situations understandable at the same time as they hide others from consideration (Gee 2011), thus privileging some and blinding us to the importance and even existence of others (Postman 1985). Data in the paper are drawn from a large multisite study of teachers in both advantaged and disadvantaged schools located in two large Australian cities. The paper focuses on the metaphors used by these teachers to name social justice in their schools, generated through video recorded observations of their teaching practice and in shared constructions (through interview) of what this practice means. In our analysis we are particularly interested in naming the influence of context – of schools positioned at the extremes of education advantage and disadvantage – arguing that teachers’ metaphors of social justice are differently constructed in different contexts, influenced by different social, cultural, and material conditions. We categorize metaphors of social justice mobilized by these teachers in five ways: in terms of equity/equality, effort, recognition, representation and capability, drawing on Bourdieu’s metaphors of capital and field (Grenfell 2011) to investigate the logic of practice underpinning social justice work within schools.


