From pedagogic action to pedagogic activity: Reading social justice dispositions from the practice of teachers' work

Russell Cross¹, Trevor Gale², Carmen Mills³
¹Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, ²University of Glasgow, ³The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

The pedagogic relationship between teachers and learners is critical to success in school. However, increasingly in many OECD nations, school success tends to map directly on to students' socioeconomic status. This paper presents findings from the second phase of a large multisite qualitative study into the social justice dispositions of teachers as they relate to their pedagogic work with students in advantaged and disadvantaged secondary schools in Australia. Our aim is to explore the potential of ‘disposition’ as a site for intervening in the nexus between class background and academic achievement. We understand teachers’ dispositions as the tendencies, inclinations, and leanings that provide un-thought or pre-thought guidance for practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). We conceive of ‘pedagogic work’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; 1990) as comprising a series of ‘pedagogic actions’ conferred with ‘pedagogic authority’. Thus, a reading of teachers’ actions has potential to reveal their authority - in this case, the social justice dispositions that inform them. In our analysis, we extend this Bourdieuan framing through the influence of cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987), to recast pedagogic work as an activity system and we explore the opportunities that the findings present for reworking existing systems to bring about different outcomes, change, and transformation that might guide new forms of future action and practice. Of particular interest are themes that emerge from analyses of classroom data examining pedagogic work across differently positioned sites and contexts for teacher activity. Using data from schools at the extremes of education advantage and disadvantage, we argue that teachers' socially just pedagogic work is enacted differently in different contexts, influenced by different social, cultural, and material conditions. Our aim is to interrogate how pedagogic work is differently informed by teacher dispositions across varied classroom spaces for practice. In so doing, the study also aims to build new conceptual tools that blend cultural-historic activity theory with Bourdieuan sociological analyses, drawing on their common Marxist origins to extend the domain of critical studies in education.


