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Abstract

This paper extends the ongoing debate about socially just pedagogy by arguing that disadvantaged learners' capacity to exercise learner agency, which is essential for learning but has been shown to be unequally constrained, can be more effectively enabled. This is accomplished by critically discussing the possibilities and limits of a selection of existing literature on socially just pedagogies, including Critical and Productive Pedagogies, for enabling learner agency. Using sociocultural theory of learner agency, the paper argues that these pedagogies implicitly aim to support learner agency but are to varying extents limited in this respect. It is argued that through a dialogue with the research on pedagogy for Possibility Thinking, disadvantaged learners' agency can be significantly increased. The paper argues that this could lead to extending learner agency from learning in the form of meaning-making and knowledge construction to learners co-imagining socially just pedagogies and co-transforming existing unjust pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Equity; inequality; disadvantage; social justice; pedagogy; education; creative pedagogy; learner agency; possibility thinking

Introduction

This paper extends the ongoing debate about socially just pedagogies by demonstrating how they implicitly aim to increase 'disadvantaged' learners' capacity to exercise learner agency and how this could potentially be achieved more effectively. This is accomplished by initiating a dialogue between research on creative pedagogies and an international selection of 'socially just' pedagogies, including Critical Pedagogy (e.g. Freire 1970; Apple 2011; Giroux 2013; Kincheloe 2008; the US and Latin America), Funds of Knowledge (e.g. Gonzales, Moll and Amanti 2005, the US), Productive Pedagogies (e.g. Lingard, Hayes and Mills, 2003; Hayes et al. 2006, Australia) and the *Teachers for a Fair Go Project* (e.g. Munns 2007; Munns, Sawyer and Cole 2013; Zammit 2011, Australia). These pedagogical approaches are labelled as socially just because they aim to disrupt practices which contribute to producing educational and wider social inequalities. In this paper, social justice is defined in terms of equal access for all learners to benefit socially and economically from education as a positional good (Reay 2012; Lingard 2005). Moreover, it includes equal access to experiencing the pleasure and enjoyment of learning in coming to understand something that is difficult yet worthwhile, for example, 'discover[ing] what it is to generate intellectual insights or what it is to read critically' (Griffiths 2012, 664).

The paper identifies key ways in which pedagogy associated with Possibility Thinking (e.g. Cremin, Chappell and Craft 2013, Craft et al. 2012, Craft 2010, Cremin, Burnard and Craft 2006, Burnard et al. 2006, Craft 2000), as a central form of creative pedagogy, can potentially contribute to socially just pedagogies by offering theorised and empirically researched practices that confer agency to learners. Research with learners in

disadvantaged contexts suggests that their capacity to exercise learner agency is strongly constrained by pedagogical practices and curricula which are likely to be more performative (e.g. Hayes, Johnston and King 2009). From a socio-cultural perspective, being in a position to exercise learner agency is essential for meaning-making and knowledge construction, which are vital aspects of learning (Vygotsky 1978, van Lier 2008).

The paper argues that the identified socially just pedagogies, to varying extents, implicitly aim to enable learners' capacity to exercise learner agency through five key aims: 1) Validating disadvantaged learners' identities and local knowledge; 2) High-order intellectual engagement with learning; 3) Critically analysing pedagogical power relations; 4) Learners co-imagining socially just pedagogies and 5) Learners co-transforming pedagogical (and wider social) relationships and practices. However, not all of the pedagogies aim to achieve all five aims. The paper also argues that the potential of these four pedagogical approaches to increase learner agency, and therefore to achieve their social justice aims, are in some ways limited. The Funds of Knowledge approaches, Productive Pedagogy and the *Teachers for a Fair Go Project* implicitly seek to offer forms of learner agency which are limited in terms of social justice, specifically in relation to Aims 4 and 5. They arguably do not allow for learners to co-imagine (and potentially co-construct) socially just pedagogies and to transform existing, less fair pedagogical practices. Imagining and transforming pedagogy are central to Critical Pedagogy. However, while Henry Giroux (2013) has argued for a need to imagine new possibilities for more socially just education, teachers and parents (and perhaps adult learners) are placed at the centre of these activities with learners in a more passive role. Placing learners as central to these two aims, alongside educators, would extend the support for learner agency from enabling meaning-making, knowledge construction and critical analysis (as inherent in the first three aims) to learners co-imagining and co-transforming pedagogy. Furthermore, a frequent criticism is that the Critical Pedagogy literature is mainly theoretical and lacks direct applicability in real classrooms. It is therefore argued that socially just pedagogies could potentially be enhanced by a dialogue, through the lens of socio-cultural theory of learner agency, with the Possibility Thinking research literature. This extends to potentially developing ways of achieving Aims 4 and 5 of co-imagining more socially just pedagogies and co-transforming existing unjust pedagogies. This is because pedagogy for Possibility Thinking could enable learners to co-imagine educational futures and to resist teachers' discourses (Craft 2010, Cremin et al 2006).

Possibility Thinking (PT) is located in a conceptualisation of creativity as ubiquitous and democratic and potentially occurring in everyday learning activities, across the curriculum, for all learners (Craft 2013). On a conceptual level, creativity can be seen as a process of imaginatively combining ideas, using existing knowledge to produce a novel product (such as an idea or object) that has value in its local or broader social context (Marsh 2010). Possibility Thinking is construed as an 'engine of creativity' and comprises a process where the learner moves from a position of asking 'what is this?' to 'what can I or we do with this?' through imaginatively investigating multiple possibilities (Craft 2010). It is primarily concerned with learner driven problem-finding and solving. It is not confined to arts-based pedagogies and nor is it embedded in a conceptualisation of creativity for purely economic benefit by producing 'flexible thinkers' and innovative employees (Harris & Lemon 2012). For creative pedagogy to contribute to socially just approaches, it needs to be valued from

social and educational angles. The research on PT has identified the pedagogical context and a number of associated practices which enable PT to occur and will be discussed in detail later.

The paper first introduces the problem of educational inequality in terms of unequal constraints on disadvantaged learners' capacity to exercise learner agency. It then reviews research on how mainstream pedagogical practices can contribute to constraining learner agency. Next, it discusses socio-cultural theory of learner agency and how it can be conceptualised as a key aim and objective of socially just pedagogies. The paper moves on to critically discuss the identified socially just pedagogical approaches in light of the five aims for socially just pedagogies presented above. The second half of the paper introduces PT and its associated pedagogical practices and identifies and discusses potential practices for conferring learner agency under each of the five aims for socially just pedagogies.

This paper is located in an ongoing debate about what socially just education systems, and thereby pedagogy, might look like (Francis and Mills 2012b). This discussion and this paper share a belief that pedagogy can make *some* difference toward achieving greater social justice in education, although its impact is likely to be limited without wider social change (Lingard and Mills 2007). Furthermore, this approach to educational social justice argues for the need of sociology of education to move beyond critique to developing understanding of the characteristics of more socially just pedagogies (Frances and Mills 2012a). This paper argues that enabling and supporting learner agency should be a central aspect of socially just pedagogy as it underpins learning and is essential to learners co-imagining and co-transforming pedagogy.

Educational inequalities and learner agency

Inequality in educational outcomes in education systems internationally, including England, has been a persistent focus of educational policy and in academic research (OECD 2014; Reay 2012). In England, it has been established that pupils' parents' social class is the strongest predictor of educational inequality in terms of attainment related outcomes (Francis and Skelton 2013), though the role of ethnicity is also significant (Rothon 2008). While government focus has primarily been on inequality in terms of attainment in the form of test scores, this paper will consider a non-attainment related aspect of learning in the form of learner agency and how it relates to learners' subject positions. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, in primary and secondary schools, have been found to develop negative self-perceptions, feelings of inferiority and inadequacy and disengagement and alienation from school curricula and teaching practices (Francis and Mills 2012b; Maguire 2010; Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Arnot and Reay 2006; Youdell 2006). Some of this research suggests that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in schools located in disadvantaged contexts experience constrained agency both as learners in relation to curricula and teaching practices and in developing their identities as learners. Other research suggests that teachers in schools with large proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, which such pupils are more likely to attend, may use more performative pedagogies (Bernstein 2000) where learners are positioned passively with teachers in control of learning (Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen 2012, Hayes, Johnston and King 2009, Thomson 2002, Haberman 1991).

The constrained learner agency of disadvantaged learners can be seen as problematic for social justice and educational equality. Learner agency is crucial to learning in the form of meaning-making, knowledge construction and developing competence in a given field (Blair 2009). Taking part in knowledge construction and gaining competence, through entering a zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978) requires learners' volition as part of a learning community (Blair 2009). This understanding of learning can be contrasted to a transmission model where learners more passively acquire knowledge from the teacher. Rather, learners need to approach new knowledge actively, developing their own meanings of how knowledge relates to their sense of self and their social positioning and contexts. Learners enter a ZPD with the support of a teacher or more competent peer who scaffolds the learner until they no longer require support and has moved through the ZPD to become more competent. In the socio-cultural paradigm, learner agency is therefore individual and collective. On the one hand, entering a ZPD requires the learner to have the will and intrinsic motivation to develop and learn and on the other, it requires the agency of the teacher or peer. As Blair (2009) argues, following John Dewey, collaborative agency works towards a communal goal in a democratic sense. Enabling individual and collective agency is therefore crucial to educational social justice in allowing learning and co-imagining more socially just pedagogy and co-transformation of existing pedagogical practices and relationships.

The extent to which learners have capacity to exercise agency depends on their recognition as valued and accepted members of a learning community by peers and teachers (Blair 2009). This is because agency is socioculturally mediated, meaning that social discourses about gender, social class, ethnicity and (dis)ability (among others) and material resources and pedagogical practices contribute to shaping a learner's capacity to exercise agency in a given context (Holland et al. 1998; Fogle 2012). There are numerous examples in the sociology of education literature of how social discourses have informed pedagogical practices to constrain the agency of learners who are not recognised as 'good' in their school context (e.g. Youdell 2006; Francis and Skelton 2005; Bradbury 2013). This can position them as 'non-learners' and thereby exclude them from being able to exercise agency as recognised and valued members of learner communities. Likewise, social discourses can serve to include and even privilege some learners' subject positions and therefore their capacity to exercise learner agency. A learner's subject position is shaped, produced and continually reproduced through everyday actions and relationships that are informed by social discourses (Holland et al. 1998). Subject positioning can therefore have a constraining or enabling effect, to varying degrees, on a given learner's capacity to exercise agency by positioning the learner within, on the margins of or outside learner communities.

Yet, while social discourses can be constraining there may be possibilities to disrupt the impact of these discourses in the classroom on learners' capacity to exercise agency. It could be argued that learner resistance against their subject positioning by teachers and peers is one such possibility. This requires resistance to be seen as an accepted form of learner agency and for teachers themselves to take part in resisting the reproduction of oppressive discourses in their pedagogical practices. Disrupting such discourses and reimagining more socially just education could be a collective aim of learner communities alongside learning through meaning-making and knowledge construction.

Being in a subject position to exercise learner agency, as an accepted member of a learning community, is crucial for learners to identify, question and criticise the production of inequalities. This equally applies to re-imagining more socially just alternatives to existing social discourses and pedagogical practices. It could therefore be argued that learner agency is central to achieving educational social justice in that it is essential for both effective learning and instigating and having ownership of social change.

Learner agency and socially just pedagogies

A number of alternative pedagogical approaches, with social justice as a key aim, have been developed in response to pedagogical practices that are informed by oppressive social discourses. These include Funds of Knowledge approaches, Productive Pedagogy, the *Teachers for a Fair Go Project*, and Critical Pedagogy. These pedagogies were selected because they share the mainly implicit aim of conferring learner agency to learners and seek to validate and accept learners who are positioned as marginalised or excluded in mainstream pedagogical discourses and practices. They share a focus on non-attainment educational 'outcomes' and recognise the role of pedagogy in producing inequalities. While they were developed in different cultural contexts, many aspects may be internationally relevant since some of the pedagogical causes of inequalities are likely to be similar across individual contexts. These include the effect of oppressive social discourses on pedagogical relationships and practices which produce unequal relationships between teachers and learners and among learners themselves. The paper will now critically discuss these pedagogical approaches in relation to each of the five aims identified in the introduction in terms of how they support and enable learner agency.

1. Validating excluded learner identities and knowledge (Aim 1)

The Funds of Knowledge approach (Gonzales et al 2005) was developed in the US by teachers and researchers seeking to move beyond deficit views of working class Latino learners and their families, who are often stereotyped as 'non-educational'. This is in order to create inclusive education where learners' 'non-dominant' identities and funds of knowledge from outside schools are accepted and recognised in the formal educational context of the school. They aim to achieve this by legitimising local knowledge and experience as an educational resource to develop a range of skills including literacy and numeracy. In the Funds of Knowledge projects (Gonzales et al 2005), teachers were trained as ethnographers and visited pupils' homes with an enquiry approach, to research their families' and communities' cultural resources. Curriculum modules were then developed by teachers where learners carried out their own research. For example, two teachers at a school in Arizona, United States, with an intake of children from working class Mexican families, researched the funds of knowledge in their pupils' home contexts (Moll et al 2005). Having developed a sophisticated understanding of their cultural lives outside of school, the teachers developed a set of activities around the theme of 'Mexican candy' (which one of their pupils' relatives produced to sell) to develop literacy skills. The activities placed learners as active in that they were asked to create a definition of candy and were equipped by teachers to carry out their own research on this topic, developing a research question and devising methods for answering it. However, critics have argued that if teachers are still ultimately in charge of

selecting what is legitimate knowledge and deciding to bring local cultural knowledge and experience into schools (Rodriguez 2013) such approaches do not *necessarily* transfer a high level of agency to learners. Therefore, socially just pedagogy may need to more overtly ensure that learners do indeed have a higher degree of agency, especially in regard to the selection and validation of 'school knowledge'. This could have a stronger impact on learners' positioning as accepted and agentive members of learning communities.

Productive Pedagogy (Lingard, Hayes, and Mills 2003) was developed in Australia from a large-scale research study of 24 schools where they observed lessons and interviewed teachers. The aim of Productive Pedagogy is to provide teachers with a lens to analyse existing pedagogical practices in order to transform them so that the academic and 'social outcomes' for all pupils are improved. The project identified four dimensions of Productive Pedagogy which include connectedness with local knowledge and cultural experiences and valuing of difference (Lingard 2005). For example, in a school with a high proportion of Indigenous students, the achievements of famous Indigenous Australians were celebrated through their pictures being displayed throughout the school and the inclusion of 'Aboriginal studies' in the curriculum (Lingard 2005).

2. Increasing high-level intellectual engagement with learning (Aim 2)

As Lingard (2005) argues, on the basis of the Productive Pedagogies research, learners in disadvantaged contexts often have little opportunity to engage with learning on a high intellectual level and that they are more likely to be offered low-level cognitive tasks where the most important thing is that that they comply. This is likely to be closely related to the predominance of performative pedagogy in schools located in disadvantaged contexts. Productive pedagogy therefore foregrounds intellectual enquiry through problematising the curriculum and analysing the relationship between knowledge and power (Lingard, Hayes and Mills 2003).   A recent re-analysis of the original Productive Pedagogies study found that the intellectual aspect of productive pedagogy in the classrooms studied was lacking, with teachers instead primarily providing care for learners' welfare (Lingard and Keddie 2013). From the perspective of socio-cultural theory, this may seriously undermine learner agency which underpins learners' participation in knowledge construction and meaning-making.

Learner agency can be seen as central to high-level intellectual engagement with learning which transcends compliance with teacher instruction and being 'on-task'. The *Teachers for a Fair Go Project* developed a model of learner engagement based on their observation of 20 exemplary teachers of students in poverty. The model is centred on a conceptualisation of successful learner engagement on three dimensions: affective, cognitive, and operative. This is achieved by teachers developing an 'insider classroom' where learners are enabled to feel capable of achieving, in co-control over classroom time and space as valued and accepted members of the learning community. Importantly, the exemplary teachers shifted their focus away from discipline (even though student behaviour was seen as a problem) to developing engagement which resulted in a significant reduction in behavioural problems (Munns and Sawyer 2013).

The affective and intellectual dimensions of the *Teachers for a Fair Go* model are particularly relevant to a socio-cultural conceptualisation of learner agency. To engage with learning on a high intellectual level, learners need to feel affective engagement and to have a

personal commitment and connection with the topic of learning (van Lier 2008). Intellectual engagement is closely related to socio-cultural theory of knowledge-construction and meaning-making which are integral to cognitive development. Taking part in these activities is highly dependent on a learners' capacity to exercise agency.

Through the socio-cultural lens of learner agency there are two main issues with the Funds of Knowledge approach, Productive Pedagogy and the *Teachers for a Fair Go* approach. The first of these is that there is a lack of focus on critically analysing the impact of learners' subject positioning in relation to their gender, ethnicity, social class and (dis)ability on their capacity to exercise agency. As this is the focus of critical pedagogy, enabling learners to initiate and develop such critique, forms the basis for agency to transform pedagogies to become more socially just. The three aforementioned approaches aim to confer agency to learners through the validation of non-dominant identities and funds of knowledge and intellectual engagement with learning. With the exception of Productive Pedagogy, they fall short of supporting learner agency in analysing and deconstructing power relations on the basis of dominant social discourses. Furthermore, these approaches do not substantially seek to confer agency to learners to co-imagine fairer alternative pedagogies and to transform current unjust practices. Productive Pedagogy does include problematising the curriculum and the encouragement of active citizenship as two of its characteristics (Lingard 2005). It is also ultimately concerned with the transformation of pedagogy by teachers. However, as the Critical Pedagogy literature focuses in far greater detail on the remaining three aims of socially just pedagogy, the remaining discussion will focus on this approach.

3. Analysing and criticising the production of inequalities and power relations (Aim 3)

Critical pedagogy aims to empower learners in questioning and analysing 'dominant knowledge' and the groups, which produce and benefit from it. This can be argued to provide learners with the skills and agency to become socially critical and to engage in public debates about political decisions, with the ultimate aim of social transformation. Critical pedagogy aims to develop consciousness of inequalities (Friere 1970) among teachers and learners by collaboratively researching and analysing power relations in order to transform the education system, and potentially disrupt inequality on a wider social basis (Kincheloe 2008).

Giroux (2007) argues that critical analysis exposes constraints on learners' (as well as teachers') agency, by examining the effects of discourses on class, gender and ethnicity on pedagogical relationships, and in so doing, possibilities for learners to exercise agency are opened up. In this way, critical pedagogy aims to confer learner agency to learners by recognising and prioritising their 'non-dominant' identities and through the intellectual exercise of criticising and deconstructing oppressive discourses and the power relations that reproduce them. Likewise, Shor (1992) argues for a critical-democratic problem-posing pedagogy where teachers and learners co-problematise topics or themes. For example:

> [Students] ask why the official textbook and syllabus are organised the way they are and how this knowledge relates to their community cultures and to conditions in society. They ask why the books and readings in the syllabus were chosen and what readings are left out of the official texts. Critical students want to know what they are not being taught as well as what they are being told. They do not wait for the teacher to 'do' education to them. They frame purposes and co-develop the syllabus and the learning process (Shor 1992, 35-36).

In a study of critical pedagogy in four schools (Apple and Beane 2007), which to varying extents successfully established the use of democratic and critical pedagogies, it was found that teachers had implemented curricula which reflected and engaged learners from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Teachers encouraged and facilitated discussions, analyses and reflections on a wide variety of ideas, to ensure that learners were exposed to divergent views and were able to critically analyse them. This could be thought of as a critical form of meaning-making and knowledge construction where learners relate analyses of knowledge and its production to their own lives and experiences of inequality and discrimination. This process is also referred to as 'knowledge transformation', as knowledge is effectively transformed by both critical analysis and as a result of learning knowledge through relating it to 'local' knowledge and experiences.

It could be argued that the agency implicit in this third aim of socially just pedagogies enables learners to exercise a form of agency that goes beyond that enabled in the first two aims. Understanding the nature of educational inequalities and how they are produced is a step further towards having a say about what an alternative education system or pedagogy might look like and ultimately, taking part in co-transforming existing practices and curricula alongside teachers. Analysing and criticising the production of inequalities and unequal power relations can be thought of as laying the foundation for co-imagining more socially just pedagogy and transforming existing unjust practices.

4. Learners co-imagining alternative, more socially just pedagogies (Aim 4)

Henry Giroux has recently called for an 'imaginative vision [of a socially just education system] which takes us beyond the common place and familiar world' using 'the language of possibility' (2013, 6). Yet it is unclear exactly who is to do this imagining which will shape what is considered to be fairer forms of pedagogy. The Critical Pedagogy texts discussed in this paper position teachers and parents as the main agents of educational change – although Shor, for example, does implicate learners in co-developing syllabi and 'learning processes' in the quote above. The aim of these Critical Pedagogies is to confer agency to learners to enable them to be socially critical citizens. It could be argued that imagining and designing more socially just pedagogies is integral to this form of democratic agency. However, learners' role in *co*-imagining more socially just pedagogies, alongside teachers and at times even without the intervention of teachers, should arguably be made a more explicit and central aim for Critical Pedagogy and other forms of socially just pedagogy.

5. Learners co-transforming existing socially unjust pedagogies (Aim 5)

The ultimate aim of Critical Pedagogy is to transform the education system and indeed society on a wider basis. Education is seen as deeply political and schools as sites for instigating wider social change (Beane and Apple 2007, Shor 1992). While the transformation of wider social inequalities can be seen as the ultimate goal, this paper is primarily concerned with the transformation of pedagogical relationships and practices within schools. Schools are seen as key sites for the development of socially critical citizens and learners need to experience active citizenship within these institutions to develop as active citizens (Beane & Apple 2007, Shor 1992). Furthermore, it is arguably crucial that learners

are conferred agency to co-transform pedagogy which they have co-imagined alongside teachers as part of this experience of citizenship.

A recurring criticism of critical pedagogy is that it has primarily been developed within academia on a theoretical level, often removed from pedagogical realities in classrooms (Apple, 2011; Christensen and Aldridge, 2013). Apple (2011) argues there is a need to increase the connection between critical pedagogy theory and the ways in which it has been and could potentially be applied in actual classrooms by providing: '…critical answers to teachers' questions about "What do I do on Monday?" Providing practical answers to this kind of question is absolutely crucial if we are to have lasting democratic reforms in schools' (2011, 24). While there is some literature on how critical pedagogy can and has been implemented in schools in different ways (e.g. Beane and Apple 2007; Christensen and Aldridge, 2013), there is an ongoing need to develop and interrogate different ways in which critical pedagogy can be realised in practice. If learners are to co-imagine and transform pedagogical practices, it is essential that teachers have access to theoretically informed and empirically researched pedagogical practices (which they, or other teachers and learners have taken part in developing). This paper will now critically discuss how Possibility Thinking and its associated pedagogical practices can potentially make an important contribution to how learner agency can be enabled through the five identified aims and achieve more socially just pedagogy.

Creativity, possibility thinking and socially just pedagogies
Possibility Thinking emerged from a phase of intensive interest in creativity in the English education system between 1999 and 2010, where it received government support in the form of education policy which promoted creativity and financial investment in schemes such as Creative Partnerships (Craft 2010). During this time, and since, a significant volume of research on creativity in education, and creative pedagogy, has been undertaken in the UK and internationally.

Jeffrey and Woods (2008) define creative pedagogy as having four key features: ownership, control, relevance and innovation. In order for learners to engage in creative processes, their learning needs to be relevant to their specific 'identities and cultures' (Jeffrey and Woods 2008, 5), which echoes the validation of learner identities and knowledge in socially just pedagogies. Learners need to feel in control of their learning to be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated and have a sense of ownership of knowledge which is internalised and integrated into their worldviews. Likewise, in sociocultural theory, intrinsic motivation is a prerequisite of learner agency. Finally, there needs to be an innovation: 'a change has taken place: a new skill mastered, new insight gained, a new understanding realised, new meaningful knowledge acquired' (Jeffrey and Woods 2008, 7). These key features of creative pedagogy relate to the socially just pedagogies in positioning the learner as agentic, through control of learning processes and ownership of knowledge-construction and meaning-making and the harnessing of imagination in order to devise new solutions to present problems.

In a democratic, everyday conceptualisation of creativity, it is bound up in choice-making as part of problem-solving: the ability to imagine and assess different possibilities to overcome a challenge or problem – such as educational and social inequalities. Agency is

essential to exercising 'mastery over choices' and being able to actualise them (Craft 2000). In an educational context, learner agency therefore underpins the expression of creativity. Creativity can be linked to social justice and pedagogy in that different possibilities perhaps yet unthought of, can be imagined to disrupt and transform mainstream pedagogies which contribute to the production of inequalities. This link is strengthened if learners are conferred agency to co-transform pedagogical relationships and practices.

Key features of Possibility Thinking

PT was first developed on a theoretical basis in the 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Craft 2000; Craft 2001) and has since been researched in empirical settings across a range of age groups spanning 3-18 years in a variety of educational settings (Craft 2010). The studies used naturalistic observation methods in a variety of school locations, although all were known to successfully employ creative pedagogies.

The research identified the key features of PT which include: self-determination, autonomy, agency, question-posing and responding, being imaginative, risk-taking and innovation (Cremin et al 2006). The development of learner-initiated imaginative narratives has since been recognised as a key feature of PT (Cremin et al 2013). Learners' investigations into different possibilities take the form of narratives with a beginning, middle and end, on a topic which has particular significance for learners (Cremin 2013). The studies also identified the need for a learning context in which children can immerse themselves in imaginative play, in order for PT occur. Learner agency is central to the cluster of PT features and the enabling context, although the following discussion will only focus on being imaginative, play, narrative and question-posing and three key pedagogical approaches which elicit PT narratives. Each of these features will be discussed in further detail in terms of how they could potentially help to meet each of the five aims of socially just pedagogy proposed in this paper.

The following extract provides an example of a PT narrative unfolding in an early years setting in England with children aged 3-5 years. The episode takes place after the practitioner has narrated a familiar story using puppets which she leaves in the play area without any instructions. The puppets include a traffic-warden, a crocodile and a man.

> Jared [a child] again controls this narrative which begins with a traffic [warden puppet held by Jared] saying 'STOP' to [an] (imaginary) car, seemingly resisting the questions Caterina [the practitioner] asks him about who is supposed to stop and why, through his silence and when he moves the play scenario to another area of the carpet (which Caterina follows) and the emergence of a new story about a hungry and vicious crocodile…Jared's crocodile puppet bites off the arm of the man puppet being held by….Caterina. Despite her protestations – first announcing, "he is biting him," then asking "so what did the man do?" and then starting to make a whimpering sound, and making her puppet curl up as if in pain, then urging Jared to look after the man once his arm has been bitten off, even negotiating to retain the other arm: "he has eaten his arm and doesn't really want you to eat his other arm in fact he probably would like two arms", Jared continues to play with his puppet in such a way that hurts hers, taking the narrative in a shocking direction and 'undoing' the previous narrative of peaceful, co-existent way… Caterina confirms who is in charge here, as Carl [another child] arrives

and wants to suggest how the story develops, saying clearly to Carl: "Jared is making up the story" and so confirming Jared as the dominant narrator…When Jared decides to use the crocodile to heal the man's arm by rubbing it better she again follows his lead, reinforcing his plan: "what a kind crocodile". The possibilities are then broadened by the children themselves who decide that far from the story being resolved, the crocodile may still be hungry and that it needs feeding. Caterina narrows this to ask, "do you think that the crocodile would like some porridge?" and although she almost immediately addresses the group of children now playing to say "maybe you could all work out what is going to happen", she returns to porridge as a theme asking a series of porridge-related questions as the crocodile eats hungrily: "is that hot porridge? . . . the crocodile ate all the porridge, what could we do to make some more?" – and as other puppets require porridge to heal: "would your puppet like some porridge to make it better?" (adapted extract from Craft, McCannon and Matthews 2012, 54-56).

It is important to note that while this episode is, for most of the time, a narrative owned by Jared, the PT research with older children (aged 9-11 years) shows that their narratives are very much collective and co-owned by learners and are less supported by teachers (see Cremin et al 2013). However, risk-taking and resistance were not evident in these episodes, ostensibly due to the pressures of the National Curriculum and the high-stakes testing regime in England, which is why an early years' episode is selected.

Validating learner identities, experience and knowledge through pedagogical practices for Possibility Thinking (Aim 1)

In the classrooms where PT occurred, three interrelated pedagogical practices which enabled PT to take place were identified: standing back and stepping forward, profiling pupil agency and creating time and space for creativity (Cremin, Burnard and Craft 2006). In the first practice researchers found that teachers developed a delicate balance between *standing back and stepping forward*. They often stood back during activities and reflected on learners' processes and intentions to understand their priorities and interests. Teachers took a speculative stance in relation to children's emerging PT narratives, asking 'what if…?' to assist the child in further developing their narratives. However, in some situations they balanced this with playing alongside children and thereby co-constructing PT narratives, when invited to, mirroring children's engagement rather than leading it. Teachers therefore took on the position as available resources, as 'agents of possibility', (Cremin, Burnard and Craft 2006) and desisted from imposing their agenda on children's emerging narratives and actively protecting children's ownership. In the puppet episode above, the practitioner allows Jared to initiate and own the PT narrative but supports its development through playing alongside him and asking questions to engender Jared's agency in exploring various possibilities in the narrative. Yet she does influence the narrative with her values of non-violent storytelling and hence it is also shaped by her.

The second pedagogical practice, *profiling children's agency*, began with teachers allowing children to identify topics for enquiry which can lead to their own PT narratives. While some of the features of this practice can be seen in the puppet episode, the description of this practice refers to different PT episodes, also in early years settings. Initial topics were often identified by teachers observing and listening to children's unfolding narratives or

explorative play to identify the topic from their interests. Teachers provided a range of provocations (e.g. stories, drama, physical resources such as puppets) to support children's initiation of PT narratives, although children were also allowed to initiate PT narratives without prompting. Children were then given the time and space to develop extended narratives and build on each other's stories. The teachers' role in this was to support the emerging narratives, which were co-constructed and co-owned by both children and adults. In the puppet episode the practitioner used questions to support Jared's emerging PT narrative. In this case, Jared owned the narrative for a good proportion of the time while others were eventually allowed to influence it. For a socially just pedagogy, ways of supporting more collaborative PT narratives, as evidenced among older children, need to be developed to balance individual and collective ownership.

Tensions and differences sometimes emerged in shared narratives or when a child sought to join another's emerging narrative. Teachers skilfully managed these by modelling ways in which they could be allowed to co-exist rather than necessarily be resolved. Here, teachers may intervene by posing a question or idea, which enable children to explore how their different intentions could co-exist and how the co-owned narrative could encompass these. In the puppet episode the teacher allowed Jared to lead the narrative but at the end he allowed the teacher to involve other children in completing it. In the third pedagogical practice, *creating time and space for creativity*, learners were conferred ownership of physical classroom space and time was treated flexibly and stretched by the teacher according to learners' agendas. Learners therefore co-owned decisions about when PT narratives were considered complete to enable learners' control over time. In the puppet episode, Jared and the other children were allowed to carry on with the narrative which the practitioner supported.

These three practices have seemingly significant potential to enable socially just pedagogies to validate non-dominant learners' identities and knowledge and thereby contribute to enabling learner agency. This is because they position PT processes within learners' interests as identified by themselves. Teachers' observation and genuine interest in these enable them to agentically facilitate and support learners' possibility exploration on their chosen topics and questions. These practices therefore promote learners' (co-)ownership over their PT narratives and processes and hence, their learning. This could also be understood as a form of meaning-making and knowledge-construction to which learner agency is central.

Increasing intellectual engagement and criticising and analysing pedagogical inequalities through problem finding and question-posing (Aims 2 and 3)

Because PT is rooted in learners' interests, which could include their local knowledge and experience, learners are arguably more likely to engage with learning on an affective level, which as the *Teachers for a Fair Go* project established (Munns et al 2013), is essential for high-level cognitive and intellectual engagement with learning.

Question-posing frames and underpins the PT process and can be seen as particularly helpful in achieving both of aims two and three by providing tools for criticising and analysing inequalities. Questioning is a pedagogical feature of all the socially just pedagogies in this paper, although PT explicitly aims to develop imaginative PT narratives through

question-posing. The PT researchers developed a theoretically underpinned and empirically studied question-posing framework (see Chappell et al. 2008 for a detailed account). The framework sets out the dimensions of questioning which relate to the purpose and possibility breadth of different question types. One of the important question dimensions is breadth in that certain question types are more likely to lead to 'possibility broad' PT, where a multitude of possibilities, yet to be clearly defined and explored, are inherent. The research suggests that when learners are given the time and space to respond to possibility broad leading questions (which are conceptualised as questions which frame and initiate PT processes), in a playful and immersive context, they engage in a rich process of questioning and question-responding, asking different versions of 'what if…?' questions and responding with different forms of 'as if' thinking (Cremin et al 2013). This enables the imagining of different possibilities, previously unthought of in the given context. The process encompasses learners picking up on others' ideas, further investigating and evaluating the ongoing results and posing new questions. While the teacher frames the overarching theme of PT, by formulating a framing question based on learners' interests, learners (co-)own the PT process. Craft, McConnon and Matthews (2012, 54) explain how possibility breadth can be achieved:

> The [puppet] provocation was initially limited to the narrative introduced by the practitioner as the enactment of the drama through puppets, however once the practitioner left the play space, the children immediately broadened the inherent possibility to enable emergence of any characterisation and narrative they chose.

For socially just pedagogies, question-posing and responding could be developed to analyse problems of inequality produced by pedagogical practices. Because pedagogical practices for PT places learners as central to identifying and refining the nature of problems, it would seem appropriate for co-identifying (with teachers) the nature of social justice problems. Teachers' standing back and observing reflectively with genuine interest, sometimes stepping forward to act as 'agents of possibility' in a playful and immersive context, could provide a pedagogical context for identifying inequality problems and their nature.

Possibility broad leading questions, grounded in learners' priorities and interests (which may be elicited with a provocation), could form a starting point for critical questioning of pedagogical and wider social power relations. This could be extended, in a playful and immersive context where learners are given time and space to engage agentically with different forms of question-posing and responding. This could create what Craft (2010) characterises as 'possibility spaces' with 'radical openness' in their potential to engender collective possibility thinking with a 'continuous, disordered engagement without closures' (58). This suggests an on-going engagement with imagining possibilities where tensions and contradictions are explored but left open and allowed to co-exist.

Learners co-imagining socially just pedagogies by developing imaginative Possibility Thinking narratives (Aim 4)

In response to Giroux's (2013) call for the imagining of alternative, socially just education, the research on PT provides potential opportunities for harnessing teachers' and

learners' imaginations to this end. The PT research identified the necessity of a playful and immersive context for PT to occur, even among the nine to 11 year-old age group. This suggests the importance of play in order for PT to occur, as well as the time and space for learners to immerse themselves in playful engagement. Play can be conceptualised as imaginative activity which enables the learner to combine seemingly unrelated objects or ideas to form one, previously unthought of (for the learner), which has a local meaning or value (Boden 2004). This definition suggests that a context of imaginative play and immersion could be created for any age group as an important prerequisite for PT to take place. Indeed, play and immersion characterise the contexts for PT in all of the classrooms from ages 3-18 and can involve a wide variety of provocations.

Within a classroom environment where learners are allowed to be playful and immerse themselves freely in a topic they are deeply interested in to identify a problem and develop solutions, PT can take root. It then develops as a narrative with a beginning, middle and end (Cremin et al 2013). A narrative does not necessarily take a linear form and can be left 'open' in that tensions or conflicts are not necessarily resolved. When these conditions are met, learners are enabled to be imaginative which is defined as 'going beyond the obvious' and 'offering unexpected and unusual interpretations or responses, envisaging novel potential' (Cremin 2013, 8). The puppet episode exemplifies these narrative features and the imaginative aspect as, for example, Jared taking the narrative in a radically different direction to what might be expected and to how the teacher narrated the original story.

Arguably, imaginative, immersive play may offer the conditions necessary to answer Giroux's call to imagine more socially just pedagogies, taking us beyond familiar forms of (unjust) pedagogy which contribute to producing inequalities. Moreover, it places learners at the centre of this process, alongside teachers, to co-imagine new pedagogies.

Learners co-transforming pedagogical practice through risk-taking and resistance (Aim 5)
This is arguably the most difficult of the five aims to achieve as it demands a high degree of risk-taking and is likely to meet a significant degree of resistance and sanction from teachers, school leaders, other citizens and education authorities who do not support their vision of transformation. While Critical Pedagogy seeks to achieve transformation on a broader social level through public activism, there are also ways in which teachers could foster their own and learners' co-resistance to the effects of oppressive social discourses on pedagogical practices. This is arguably a crucial step towards transformation of practices. The co-imagination discussed so far and the co-resistance discussed below could arguably form a significant foundation for co-transformation. The discussion will now turn to pedagogical practices and elements of PT which nurture resistance and its close associate, risk-taking.

Risk-taking was a feature of the early years' pedagogical practices in the PT research, where a connection can be made to resistance. Individual children were allowed ownership of their PT narratives, as in the puppet episode and were conferred the agency to invite or resist others, including children's and teachers' bids to join in and contribute to its development. Jared is allowed to take the narrative in unexpected and radical directions, away from the practitioner's more conventional children's story in moving from the traffic narrative straight to the crocodile episode which he then made violent. Jared was effectively allowed to take risks in the development of the narrative and the practitioner equally took a risk in allowing

Jared to own the narrative and in supporting him to resist others' influence. This requires a learning context in which risk-taking is accepted rather than avoided and in which learners feel safe, not least on an affective level, to take risks. Learners need to be enabled to act with self-determination, autonomy and agency in order to take risks (Craft et al. 2012). To enable risk-taking, teachers not only need to allow learners' risk-taking but also to take risks themselves.

This tolerance of risk-taking and resistance needs to extend to pedagogical relationships on a broader basis to allow both individual and groups of learners to resist individual teachers' unjust pedagogical practices. It also needs to allow for learners and teachers together to co-resist wider unjust practices such as high-stakes testing regimes and other policy requirements and school practices that lead to inequalities. Risk-taking and resistance for socially just pedagogy therefore requires a balance between learners' agency and collective agency for learners and teachers.

So far, potential opportunities for PT to contribute to achieving the five main aims of socially just pedagogy have been proposed in this paper. However, if teachers are to be successful in achieving these aims through pedagogical practices for PT the effects of dominant social discourses about social class, gender, ethnicity and (dis)ability on pedagogical relationships need to be directly addressed. Teachers and learners need to be aware of these discourses and how they can affect classroom relationships and interactions so that they can analyse these as part of their pedagogical practice. In conferring learner agency it is important to avoid doing so unequally especially when engaging in PT where ownership of narratives is important and can sometimes be individual as well as collective. Teachers need to be aware of whether particular learner subjectivities are valued higher than others within the classroom and if any are marginalised or even excluded. This consciousness should be retained even if pedagogical power relations are transformed as new discourses about preferred subjectivities may arise.

Conclusion

This paper has extended the ongoing debate about socially just pedagogies by demonstrating how a selection of approaches implicitly aim to increase 'disadvantaged' learners' capacity to exercise learner agency and how this can potentially be achieved more effectively. This was accomplished by initiating a dialogue between research on Possibility Thinking (PT) and a selection of socially just pedagogies, including Funds of Knowledge, Productive Pedagogies, the *Teachers for a Fair Go Project* and Critical Pedagogy. On the basis of this dialogue, the paper identified five key aims for socially just pedagogies and proposes that they provide a basis for how socially just pedagogy can engender and support learner agency. However, the paper also argues that the potential of the four existing social just pedagogies to increase learner agency, and therefore to achieve their social justice aims, is in some ways limited. It is therefore argued that socially just pedagogies could potentially be enhanced, through the lens of a socio-cultural theory of agency, by the key aspects of Possibility Thinking (being imaginative, play, immersion, risk-taking and question-posing and responding) and the pedagogical practices that enable learners' PT narratives to develop.

The ways in which PT and its associated pedagogies can potentially contribute to achieving socially just pedagogies are as follows. The three key pedagogical practices of

standing back and stepping forward, profiling pupil agency and creating time and space could contribute to *validating disadvantaged learners' identities and local knowledge* (Aim 1) by rooting PT narratives firmly in learners' interests and supporting their individual and collective ownership of the possibility narratives they generate. This validation of otherwise excluded identities and knowledge is, in socio-cultural terms, a powerful enabler of learner agency and provides a foundation for the other four aims to be achieved. Question-posing and responding, as key features of PT could contribute to *enabling high-order intellectual engagement with learning* (Aim 2) as well as *critically analysing unequal pedagogical and wider social power relations* (Aim 3). The taxonomy of question-posing and question-responding and the dimensions of question framing and breadth (Chappell et al 2008) can provide tools for co-defining problems of social and educational inequality in playful, immersive and inclusive environments where learners are enabled to engage agentically on high affective and intellectual levels. In response to Giroux's (2013) call for the imagining of alternative, socially just education, the enabling of learners to play and be imaginative potentially provides the context for *co-imagining different possibility narratives for socially just education* (Aim 4). Imaginative, immersive play may provide the necessary context for imagining more socially just pedagogies and in Giroux's terms, take us beyond familiar forms of pedagogies that contribute to producing inequalities. Pedagogical practices of PT that enable risk-taking and resistance can potentially form a basis for enabling *learners to co-transform pedagogical practice* (Aim 5). In the development of PT narratives, teachers support learners' (co-) ownership of their narratives, allowing them to move in radical directions. Learners are allowed to resist teachers' and others' influence although teachers attempt to balance individual and collective ownership and influence on the development of PT narratives. This could be an important foundation for learners (co-) resisting teachers' unjust pedagogical practices and for learners and teachers to resist wider, oppressive policy requirements such as high-stakes testing and the marketisation of education which help perpetuate educational inequalities.

These practices and features are designed to enable and support learners' agency in terms of meaning-making and knowledge construction, through the first three aims. Aims 4 and 5 extend learner agency beyond socio-cultural processes of learning to a powerful form of agency which enables learners to shape the nature of pedagogical practices. These practices can allow all learners to engage with learning on a high intellectual and affective level, to experience the enjoyment of learning and to benefit from education as a positional good (Griffiths 2012).

Before these aspects of PT and their associated pedagogical practices can have an impact on classroom practice in the context of socially just pedagogies, further research is necessary to develop their potential for meeting the five aims as discussed above. It is imperative that this research develops theoretical understanding as well as classroom practice to ensure that it is accessible to teachers in the classroom. The aims of this research could be: to develop ways of creating enabling contexts for the development of imaginative PT narratives based on learners' own initiatives, experiences, knowledge and interests for all age groups; to understand how question-posing and question-responding can be used to define problems of inequalities and to analyse and criticise the processes that lead to their production; to investigate how the development of PT narratives, where risk-taking and

resistance are supported can enable learners and teachers to co-imagine more socially just pedagogies and transform existing unjust ones. Finally, as part of all these research aims, ways for teachers to balance individual and collective learner agency need to be developed as well as ways of balancing learner and teacher agency. A particular challenge for this research will be how teachers can develop playful and immersive contexts for older learners (beyond early childhood) to imagine possibilities for alternative pedagogies within the constraints of neoliberal education policies in countries such as England, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

This research could potentially lead to the development of significant new understanding of how socially just pedagogies can enable learner agency, which is essential to both learning and achieving social justice. There is a great need internationally to continue to develop understanding of how pedagogy can contribute to more socially just outcomes for disadvantaged learners as educational inequalities persist in many countries, including the UK, the United States and Australia. This paper argues that further investigating the opportunities offered by Possibility Thinking and its associated pedagogical practices could be instrumental to enabling learners to co-imagine more socially just pedagogical practices and relationships and to co-transform existing unjust ones on a collective basis with teachers. There may be potential here to develop the existing socially just approaches discussed in this paper or indeed to develop new approaches. However, as this paper has demonstrated, it is important that socially just pedagogies enable learner agency and are co-imagined and co-constructed by learners rather than just educators or academics.

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