ARTICLE

Asking the ‘who’: a restorative purpose for education based on relational pedagogy and conflict dialogue

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Abstract

Drawing upon Gert Biesta’s concept of the learnification of education, we maintain that a meaningful purpose for Canadian schools has been lost. We demonstrate that the very fact of relationship is limited in curricula. The absence of relationality enables the continued privilege of normative identities. A restorative approach, based on asking who is being educated, could repurpose schooling. We draw upon examples from literature, current political events and our classroom-based research to illustrate how conflict dialogue, based on relational pedagogy, offers one path for a restorative approach. We conclude that conflict dialogue provides opportunities to engage diverse students in inclusive curricular experiences. Such a restorative approach exposes and explores the who of education for the purpose of promoting positive social conditions that allow for human flourishing.

Keywords: Relational pedagogy, conflict dialogue, restorative approach, neoliberal education, marginalised students.

1. Introduction

Public education in Canada is firmly rooted in the neoliberal age. Education is no longer defined by social citizenship, but rather by the ‘attainment of the “complex skills” necessary for individual success in a global economy’ (Mitchell, 2003: 399, as quoted in Kennelly and Llewellyn, 2011: 899). The school choice movement sells privatisation from school access to textbooks, career-capital and marketplace ideology determines learning outcomes and a decrease in public service increases demands for performance measures from teachers (e.g. Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006: 12-16). A manifestation of neoliberal education can be found in some types of standardised tests that are used to seemingly prove that poorly run schools, rather than social systems, are to blame for underachievement. Each

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year thousands of third- and sixth graders sit for a two-week assessment period in our home province of Ontario to write standardised tests in reading, writing and arithmetic. Joel Westheimer (2015: 30-31) has termed these ‘The test scores that ate humanity.’ The lack of humanity is evident as students’ human rights are justified in relation to their academic performance measures. For example, the Ottawa School Breakfast Program, which feeds 8,000 schoolchildren every morning in Canada’s capital, poses this question: ‘Why is it important to feed children who are hungry?’ (Ottawa Network for Education, 2018; Westheimer, 2010: 7). The fact that this question has to be asked to justify the programme is troubling, but their answer is more so: ‘Children who receive a healthy, nutritious head start to the day show a marked improvement in academic achievement’ (Ottawa Network for Education, 2018, as quoted by Westheimer, 2015: 31). In other words, we must feed children for performance and not simply because they do not have enough to eat.

In this age of measurement, the purpose of education is ‘for a student to get it, comprehend it, be “conscious” of it; even if she didn’t want to get it, didn’t enjoy it, or does not intend to use it’ (Ellsworth, 1997: 46). This approach is what Gert Biesta (2009: 36-39, 2015: 3) refers to as the learnification of education. Biesta maintains that education has become guided by a language of learning (e.g. learner-centred, learning spaces) rather than education. Learning has been reduced to sense-making of an object world in which the self is the centre of that world (Wood, 2015). Learning spaces, even if communal, are reduced to places for the individual to understand something. The nature of that something is almost irrelevant. Biesta suggests a focus on classrooms as comprised of human beings seeking to understand what it means to be in relation with another is limited (Wood, 2015). Learning is individualistic language implying a competitive process for the acquisition of knowledge. This stands in contrast to education that implies a relationship among people and for a broader purpose (Biesta, 2009: 39). That purpose has various potentialities, Biesta contends, but must include the creation of places where children may practice together their ‘grown-up-ness’. He defines ‘grown-up-ness’ as an educational value by which students may respond to the challenges of human living – democracy, ecology and care – without positioning themselves in the centre of the world (i.e. concerns for life and not survival; Biesta, 2015: 8-10). He encourages educators to think more about the purpose of our drive for outcomes and practices by asking: What is education for? Who is it for?

It is this latter question that we posit must be the priority. The who must come before the what. The relationships at stake must determine the content or the drive to acquire knowledge in schools. A restorative approach to education is attentive to those relationships. Educators are often familiar with restorative justice as a disciplinary response. For example, restorative justice advocates considered who is being harmed by zero tolerance policies in schools. Their answer is overwhelmingly the most marginalised populations (McCluskey, 2014; Williams, 2013). Schools across Canada, in response, adopted progressive discipline policies, inclusive of restorative justice (Winton, 2012; e.g. Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). A restorative approach is, however, far more than reactive practices
to manage conflict (e.g. Brown, 2017; Evans & Vaandering, 2016). A restorative approach to education demands relationality in all aspects of teaching/learning. Relational theory holds that as human beings relationships are a fact – human beings are constituted in and through relationships (Nedelsky, 1997, as cited in Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015: 11). We contend that the very fact of relationship is limited in curricula. The absence of relationality or the who of education enables the continued privilege of normative identities. The identities of those most marginalised, such as women, racialised people, Indigenous peoples and economically disadvantaged groups, are excluded when education is about individualised learner objectives. In this article, we argue that a restorative approach exposes and explores the who of education for the purpose of promoting positive social conditions that will allow us to thrive (Mavor, Platow & Bizumic, 2017).

We explore one form of a restorative approach, namely, a relational pedagogy through the use of conflict dialogue. Dialogic inquiry is a critical reflection on social and conflictual issues with attention to the relationships at stake within a classroom and community. Conflict dialogue requires confrontation of social systems of oppression and the facilitation of more inclusive relationships and curricula – multiple histories, experiences and perspectives among students. We examine types of relational pedagogy that draw upon conflict dialogue and assess their effectiveness as a restorative approach in classrooms. We explore these types of relational pedagogy by drawing on examples from previous literature, current political events and our classroom-based research. We conclude that when teachers maximise conflict dialogue through close relationships, they increase opportunities for greater inclusion of diverse and marginalised students. Examples are not intended to be models for practice, but rather to illustrate the various and complex ways a teacher may facilitate conflict dialogue as one path for a restorative approach in a classroom.

2. The ‘who’ in curricula and the dialogic principle

Who is harmed when the very fact of relationship is missing from curricula? The answer is all of us, but we want to provide two examples. The first group is young girls who are excluded from citizenship education. Social studies education, particularly civics, prizes the rational and responsible citizen. Jacqueline Kennelly and Kristina Llewellyn (2011: 902) demonstrate in their analysis of three provincial civics-oriented curriculum guidelines that the adjectives of responsible and rational to describe desirable citizenship overwhelm attributes like active and connected. These are characteristics that are strongly associated with masculine objectivity and detachment and usually are set in marked contrast to seemingly feminine characteristics of sociability and emotionality (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011: 907-910; Llewellyn, 2012). Acknowledgement in curricular guidelines of the affective domain, which would typically be associated with the feminine, remains relatively insignificant. Social studies curricula make it a priority to address major concepts like capitalism and democracy, representing men as rulers, but rarely is the power relations of patriarchy analysed or named. Further-
more, references to relationships, when discussed, are confined to family issues at
the lowest grade levels and are almost nonexistent by high school – replaced,
rather than associated, with government and economy. For example, the province
of Nova Scotia’s social studies’ framework makes citizenship a personal, abstract
endeavour requiring ‘that individuals first know who they are – that they have a
sense of identity, and that they know where they fit in the scheme of things’
(Nova Scotia, 1999: 8). This is often referred to as the ‘expanding horizons’ model
of teaching. Wanda Hurren (1998: 65) points out, within this model, younger
children, who are mostly taught by women, study the self and family, and as they
get older, when more men will teach them, they expand their study to world
issues and international conflicts. This supports a hierarchical framework by
which the study of issues associated with men require more sophistication and
maturity – greater rationality. Relationality, what one might think as a central
component of schooling for social change, is missing from civic learning (Kennelly
& Llewellyn, 2011: 909). What would it mean for youth civic engagement, and
particularly young women’s political desires, if emotional connectedness – an
imperative for commitment to social change across all genders – were at the fore‐
front of civics curricula? We need a restorative approach to civics that moves
away from individual skills and towards the interactive aspects – the range of
public and private relationships – that are essential to humanity.

The second group we provide as an example is Indigenous youth. In the wake
of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) it has become ever
more apparent that social studies curricula, particularly history education,
exclude Indigenous knowledges. Cree educator Dwayne Donald (2009) reminds us
that ‘the tipis and costumes approach has been applied to classrooms for many
years, but leaves teachers and students with the unfortunate impression that
Indians have not done much since the buffalo were killed off and the West was
settled’ (p. 5). There have been recent curricular reforms in many provinces, espe‐
cially with respect to survival testimonials of residential schools and treaty educa‐
tion. But as Susan Dion, Jennifer Tupper, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook and others have
shown, too often teachers, predominantly white, have not addressed their settler
responsibility to the history of colonialism and its legacy for just relations
between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (e.g. Dion, 2004; Ng-A-Fook &
Smith, 2017; Tupper & Cappello, 2008). This is a perpetuation of what Donald
(2009: 1) refers to as the mythology of the fort – a deeply embedded historical
narrative of Canadian nationhood that characterises Indigenous and Canadian
lives as walled, separate realities. He contends that such colonial frontier logics
(e.g. inside the wall civilisation and outside authentic ‘Indians’) shape the stories
told of history in schools (Donald, 2009: 2-3). For example, in 2015 schoolchil‐
dren were encouraged to celebrate the 200th birthday of Canada’s first recognised
Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. Then Prime Minister Stephen Harper
called Macdonald ‘a shining example of modesty, hope and success’, while histori‐
ans acknowledged he was the architect of residential schools with a desire to see
Canada as an Aryan nation (Cheadle, 2015; Stanley, 2015). What would it mean
for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples if we rejected
‘denial of historic, social and curricular relationality’ (Donald, 2009: 5)? We need
a restorative approach to history education that moves away from a narrative of white man’s progress and towards colonialism as a shared condition. Restorative approaches are inherently connected to Indigenous ways of learning and being together. These are the relations that are missing in classrooms, but that are essential for understanding how we can have a partnership of nations in Canada.

Ultimately, when considering the who of curricula, it is imperative to reflect on dialogic processes and assumptions in education. ‘Who’s in’ and ‘who’s out’ need to be questioned. The previous examples make clear that now, more than ever, a diversity of young people’s voices challenging injustice and inequity are not being heard (Gal & Duramy, 2015). Teachers need to engage in bottom-up dialogic pedagogies that critically engage marginalised voices and encourage all students to question the who in their relational sphere. They need to engage in curricular experiences that purposefully generate conflict dialogue, which address issues of power to create spaces for inclusion of multiple histories, experiences and perspectives. This is necessary because problems at school, and often the resultant social exclusions, are directly related to inequitable power relations and a structural violence that perpetuates a devaluing of students’ cultural capital, particularly marginalised youth (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2004; McCluskey, 2008, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003). A restorative approach, based on strong relational connection and consistent opportunities for conflict dialogue, provides students with an opportunity to openly deal with underlying causes of violence, to explicitly acknowledge issues pertaining to sociocultural difference, such as racism and discrimination (Bickmore, 2008; Parker, 2016a), and to be inclusive, participatory citizens (Avery & Hahn, 2004; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001).

In the next sections, we briefly outline four approaches to relational pedagogy through conflict dialogue: (a) minimising conflict dialogue in controlled relationships; (b) maximising conflict dialogue in controlled relationships; (c) minimising conflict dialogue in close relationships; and (d) maximising conflict dialogue in close relationships. We demonstrate that maximising conflict dialogue in a classroom based on close relationships provides the greatest opportunities for education that is inclusive of diverse students’ histories, experiences and perspectives. This approach to relational pedagogy has the potential to positively affect students’ academic learning, societal inclusion and capacity for civic engagement. To do otherwise risks a continuation of the learnification of education and further marginalisation of vulnerable students.

3. Four approaches to relational pedagogy and conflict dialogue

3.1 Controlled relationships: minimising conflict dialogue

In so many ways, education continues to perpetuate and support dominant, exclusionary and colonial pedagogy that inhibits relational connection and conflict dialogue (Abdi, 2012; Williams, 2013). For example, many teachers continue to use lecture-based approaches that rely on a top-down, authoritative delivery of information with little space for student voice – processes characterised as defen-
sive teaching for classroom control (McNeil, 2013). Similarly, redundant, repetitive tasks for assessment impede opportunities for critical reflection that support relationality through dialogue. From silently copying notes from the board and textbook to passively completing worksheets and correcting them with the ‘right’ answers – this kind of day-to-day classroom ethos is often a tool for controlling behaviour and silencing student voices that may dissent. This form of teaching does little to prepare young people to develop their ‘grown-up-ness’ – challenging and participating in globalised social communities for peace and justice (Burbules & Torres, 2000).

Christina Parker’s (2016b) classroom research provides illustration of how this type of controlled environment minimises conflict dialogue and holds the potential to harm students. In one culturally diverse Grade 4 classroom, the teacher tightly controlled students’ relationships by making them accountable for each other’s behaviour. Like a game of Survivor, students could vote a peer out of their group if the peer did not meet behaviour expectations, such as not completing homework or talking out of turn. That student would then have to go and find another group that would take him or her in. Groups were given points for good behaviour, such as remaining quiet and on task, or completing homework. At the end of each month, the group with the most points was treated to a McDonald’s lunch. This competitive landscape clearly impacted how this teacher addressed conflict in the curriculum. For instance, in a unit on the medieval period the teacher reinforced the concept of hierarchy. In a role-play exercise, she assigned students to different power roles, giving already dominant students higher-status roles, such as King. She limited opportunities to challenge or critically reflect on the implications of the power dynamics across these roles.

In such authoritarian classrooms, passive listening prevails, with little time to share divergent or varying perspectives. Classroom talk usually focuses on individual learning of content derived from pre-determined exercises that provide the ‘truth’. Challenging any of these ‘facts’ deviates from the intended curriculum. Thus, even when a teacher may present opportunities for communication, such as with a role-playing exercise, it is often based on a learnification-based dialogue. The teacher assumes the classroom is a place for balanced discussion among equals (McAvoy & Hess, 2013, drawing on Sanders, 1997). In a context in which the point of relationship is control, the structural imbalances rooted in colonial and patriarchal histories of unequal democracies continue to go ignored. The voices of subaltern groups go unheard because oppressors are unable to hear them or to engage outside of their Western consciousness and values (Spivak, 1988/2010). An uncritical view of dialogue that ignores unequal relationships in a classroom means that “some citizens are [perceived] better than others at articulating their arguments in rational, reasonable terms,” making their views more respected and powerful (Sanders, 1997: 348, quoted in McAvoy & Hess, 2013: 24). As Freire (1996) argues, dialogue in contexts of unequal power becomes indoctrination and a culture of silence prevails. While marginalised students suffer the greatest harm, students who conform to normative identities and who teachers recognise as academically high-achieving do not benefit from such a classroom. While they may do fairly well on standardised tests, they are not pre-
pared for the ‘grown-up-ness’ of living in relation with others (Biesta, 2015: 8-10). Classrooms with controlled relationships and minimal conflict dialogue do not prepare students for humanity – academic learning for social citizenship. These classrooms perpetuate the exclusion that is inherent in traditional structures of schooling with little or no attention paid to the who of education. Unfortunately, for many teachers this is the safest and easiest way to teach because of confining hierarchal structures of schooling and public scrutiny of those who do not maintain political neutrality.

3.2 Controlled relationships: maximising conflict dialogue

Of course, there are many teachers who are fully aware of the transformative power of sharing different perspectives on social issues. These teachers often reject political neutrality and choose to share their position on particular political or social issues. That does not mean, however, that these teachers provide space for students to explore their and others’ positions. Teachers who maximise conflict dialogue but still seek control of relationships maintain an authoritarian classroom: they are still expert deliverers of content, even if they are critically questioning perspectives. The result again is that opportunities to challenge learnification and give space to students’ voices and reflections are constrained.

A study conducted by Parker, which was specific to teachers’ dialogic pedagogies, is illustrative. In one case, she observed a Grade 7 teacher trying to explain why some Acadians during the 17th and 18th centuries in Canadian history sought to distance themselves from identifying with France, their mother country, even joining forces with the British. The teacher drew on what he perceived to be his distant Japanese ancestry to address issues of identity and patriotism. He noted that, in a war where Japan was Canada’s enemy, as a Canadian-born citizen, he would admonish Japan and ‘suit up with Canada’. While outspoken with the students, this teacher’s passionate perspective silenced many voices in his classroom. He did not account for the fact that many of his students had recently migrated from Sri Lanka and had participated in protests against the Canadian government for its inaction in the Sri Lankan civil conflict going on at that time. During individual interviews outside the classroom, these students shared anxieties and confusion about issues of national loyalty and allegiance – they felt torn between a country they considered home, Canada, and their country of origin, Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the teacher’s use of patriarchal, warfare language – ‘suiting up’ – was a challenge for the female Sri Lankan students, who felt strongly about aligning with Sri Lanka. As one privately remarked, ‘I really hate the Canadian government right now.’

Diverse students’ identities complexify how historical and conflictual issues can be addressed in the social studies classroom in ways that deeply impact relational connection. This teacher was acutely aware of how he controlled the dialogue and took ownership of the class perspectives: ‘The stuff I didn’t agree with, they didn’t agree with either.’ Yet he prided himself on bringing in newspapers and other media to share happenings around the globe. This desire to control relationships while maximising conflict dialogue did not allow opportunities to engage the diverse perspectives of his students. The teacher brought conflict to
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the forefront of learning when issues were hypothetical and abstract. Without grounding conflict as meaningful to the lived histories of students, however, the teacher continued a ‘denial of historic, social and curricular relationality’ (Donald, 2009: 5). Ironically, the teacher perceived of himself as politically engaged with students, but he distanced himself politically by being inattentive to the power of the teacher–student relationships. Such a lesson and teacher positionality reinforces the learnification of education. Survival of the self and compliance to abstract values trump concerns for life that is defined in relation to one another. Using historical moments to critically reflect on social issues can expose students to divergent perspectives, but only when there is space for students to share their own perspectives and to pose questions and challenges with their peers and teachers. To do otherwise inhibits the kind of relational understanding that conflict dialogue can stimulate.

3.3 Close relationships: minimising conflict dialogue

In contrast, there are educators who make relationality a centre of their classrooms, but do not have the tools or the inclination to purposefully invite conflict into the classroom. An exaggerated illustration of such a teacher is found in Roald Dahl’s story of Matilda: Matilda’s teacher, Miss Honey, is kind, caring and comforting with strong relationships with her students. When conflict arises, however, she quickly hides under her desk. A more common case is found with teachers who are familiar with a restorative approach. A restorative approach is sometimes mistaken for a simple ethic of care between the teacher and students. When this is the case, restorative practices, like circles, are employed to open space for students to share their identities and build communal norms in a classroom. Those circles, while often building a sense of care for one another in a learning space, do not necessitate a critical reflection on power dynamics that define the classroom. Students may ‘feel’ heard, but what they say does not make a difference to what is learned and how they learn it (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). This may occur because teachers are reticent to raise substantive questions about students’ perspectives or they assume that the act of being in relationship does not require commensurate curricular revision.

This scenario was evident in a Grade 8 class that Parker, along with Kathy Bickmore (2017), observed. The teacher facilitated weekly community circles to promote relationship building. The teacher initiated circles with discussion prompts she pulled from a deck of cards. In one instance, she invited her students to share something interesting they found. Students began to share their findings about topics such as money, books, toys and pencils. However, when one student began to share items related to the violence in their community, others began to chime in with one-word descriptors like bullet shells, bags of blood and weapons. The teacher quickly intervened, ended the dialogue and firmly announced that they will be moving on to the next topic. This teacher believed that shutting down difficult knowledge protected her students. She did not recognise that disregarding conflict dialogue put relationships at risk in her classroom. The students’ ability to discuss lived experiences of violence that define their shared communities – the who of education in this context – was devalued. This teacher’s reaction was
rooted in a lack of teacher training about how to navigate difficult knowledge and engage, rather than avoid, sociopolitical and historical questions connected to identity.

In post-conflict contexts – a state that defines Canada – a culture of avoidance of historical complicity in harm often makes it challenging to question the state. For Canada, narratives of peacekeeping permeate nationhood and schooling. As such, the teacher’s role becomes disaggregating conflict upon which society is based from the school environment. Social studies then centres on the transference of preconceived values of ‘good’ citizenship and nationhood (e.g. tolerance; Llewellyn, Cook & Molina, 2010). Social studies methods, in this case, may default to false two-sided debates or, as noted earlier, hypothetical constructs, rather than engage in conflict dialogue about systemic oppression. A restorative approach embraces the cognitive dissonance that comes with conflict dialogue (Festinger, 1957; Houser, 1996). Cognitive dissonance refers to learning from discomfiting knowledge and perspectives. This disequilibrium creates a space where a teacher can facilitate critical self and collective reflection in a classroom (Houser, 2008; Shor, 1992). The conflict that may come from disrupting taken-for-granted knowledge – for example, genocide of Indigenous peoples or racialised violence by police – then supports, rather than undermines, a strong relational landscape for education. Alternatively, when conflict is minimised, despite intentions for close relationships, a teacher fails to purposefully consider who is included and excluded by the power of schools. For a nation like Canada that is in the process of establishing relationships among nations and peoples, such work takes time, patience and courage in the context of public schools.

3.4 Close relationships: maximising in conflict dialogue

It is close relationships with maximum space for conflict dialogue that provides the greatest opportunity for education to be about the who and, thus, promote conditions for students to thrive. Teachers familiar with and empowered to use relational pedagogies, such as collective decision-making or community circles, seek to strengthen relationships through conflict dialogue. Relationships and conflict dialogue are not set in opposition. These teachers support a restorative approach that is guided by the principles of deliberative democracy and appreciative inquiry (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). As McAvoy and Hess (2013) explain: ‘When students engage in this type of talk, it encourages them to move from the self-interested thinking of aggregative democracy (“What is best for me?”) to the deliberate question, “Which option seems best/most fair given varied views and perspectives?”’ (p. 20). The latter type of questioning opens space for conflict based on the fact of being in relation with one another. The outcome is a relational understanding and, ideally, students’ development of their own ‘grown-up-ness’ or ability to respond to the challenges of human living (Biesta, 2015).

This is what Parker (2016a) observed from her research in one culturally diverse Grade 7 class. The class participated in a simulation inspired by the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in Lower and Upper Canada and then engaged in an exercise to reflect on the simulation. Students, who played the part of the masses/colonists, shared how their basic needs and rights were infringed upon and their voi-
ces rendered meaningless; students, who played oligarchs and the establishment, shared how it felt to have their security threatened. The students critically reflected on the varying social locations in early 19th-century Canada and how social status shaped political platforms. They also discussed why political affiliations, based on economics, language and race, escalated into violence and war. Their reflections touched upon the conflicts of democratic governance, including suppression of citizens and fair representation. Students dovetailed from the simulation planned by the teacher to challenge and name instances of exclusion that deeply affected them today. They were prepared to constructively address conflict they initiated from the exercise because the teacher had prioritised building a community of learners based on dialogical-based classroom activities (e.g. deliberative questions and circles). They had put in work to support strong, student-driven relations and, as such, were able to productively engage in critical historical analysis and empathic political reasoning. Through deep relational connection and opportunity for conflict dialogue, this teacher took a restorative approach that nurtured what Zembylas (2007) refers to as critical emotional literacy – the ability to question cherished beliefs and emphasise different perspectives that present us with the possibility to think otherwise.

Of course, a restorative approach, with strong relationships and space for conflict dialogue, is not without significant challenges. Close relationships that maximise conflict dialogue is difficult for teachers when school-based lessons (e.g. debate and competition) and neoliberal culture glorify polarising narratives (e.g. Indigenous versus non-Indigenous, Francophone versus Anglophone). Schools continue to operate and perpetuate structural inequality. Dialogue, despite intentions otherwise, can exclude individuals and groups when operating within these structures. For example, multilingual learners, for whom English is not their first language, may find dialogue an oppressive primary method of learning in most of Canada’s classrooms (Burbules & Torres, 2000). Similarly, dialogue by white, settler teachers, who numerically dominate Canada’s schools, may push out racialised students from classrooms if their facilitation is not rooted in culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Ultimately, in dialogic exchanges, power dynamics remain omnipresent. Identifying creative ways to name such dynamics and consciously working towards creating norms for engagement and empowerment are fundamental for a restorative approach to education. Lastly, such an approach is unsustainable if it is separate from the broader mandate of schools, including core curricular concepts, school culture and community outreach (Habib, Densmore-James & Macfarlane, 2013; Noddings, 2012). The who of education – students’ complex and intersecting histories, experiences and perspectives – can only be normalised in classrooms when pedagogy is not reduced to a set of practices by teachers.

4. Conclusion

Conflict dialogue is a restorative approach because it necessitates relationality as the core of education. In asking critical questions that explicitly name the who
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across content, purpose and relationships, teachers and administrators can consider how processes of inclusion and exclusion operate within the confines of traditional schooling and their impact on marginalised students. The identities of students and teachers ultimately influence the ways in which conflictual issues are approached in schools (Parker, 2016a). When teachers and administrators respond to young people through a restorative approach, they question how social and structural inequalities have produced harmful behaviour and/or outcomes in our institutions (Au, 2017). Conflict dialogue holds the potential in a classroom to build stronger, healthier relationships: without this space, relationships would remain superficial and normative. Deep relational connection involves knowing how to respond constructively to each other and supports students in analysing conflictual issues embedded in curricula (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). Conflict dialogue and relationality empower students to intervene, raise alternative ways of knowing and participate in transforming how relationships and conflict are approached in society.

A restorative approach, based on relationality, is antithetical to current market-driven objectives for education and restores the human being or the who to classrooms. It stands as a challenge to the learnification of education that is focused on the individual’s accumulation of knowledge (Biesta, 2009: 36-39, 2015: 3). Constrained by standardised testing and timelines for covering curriculum expectations, teachers may view building relationships or engaging in conflict as disconnected from academic content and/or fear reprisals from community stakeholders. We demonstrate in this article, however, that preparing students to engage in meaningful and critical dialogue about concerns for life is the very purpose of education. Schools must provide students with consistent opportunities to wrestle with diverse social issues and histories that have implications for how we may thrive together. A restorative approach supports dialogue with ‘difficult knowledge’ to build an ethical relationality among students; imagines a quest for understanding as ‘communal interactions’ that seek justice across time and space; and offers education ‘as a social relationship’ for inclusive, healthy learning communities (Ellsworth, 1997: 6; Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). A restorative approach moves away from the neoliberal learner language and culture of classrooms and communities and towards relational student engagement necessary for democratic and inclusive social change (Bishop, Picard, Ramkay & Sargent, 2015; Bloom & Reichert, 2014). Such an approach will never succumb to the test scores that continue to eat humanity (Westheimer 2015: 30-31); rather it will feed humanity for humanity’s sake.

References


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