



UNDER THE BRIDGE by Kirsten Johnston
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EDPROF 741 : Documentary Analysis
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Under the Bridge powerfully challenges a dominant discourse that says it's a given that students from poorer areas will underachieve, because they come from a dysfunctional community that has high rates of domestic violence, and gang related crimes. Instead Papukura High's principal Mr Rohs believes this is not a given, and "that those deficit factors in themselves can't be used as an excuse for young people failing to achieve at school" He also challenges the dominant discourse, that not everyone can achieve in low decile schools. He believes in giving all students at Papukura the confidence to succeed by 'Getting the kids to achieve a sense of self worth so they can feel they can achieve and we can flourish.' (Rohs)

Papukura High is in a community that doesn't believe their school is a place to gain a good education from; a high percentage of kids leave Papukura every morning to get educated somewhere else. We know now that if schools "are not well supported, instead of countering inequality they often reinforce it " (Rash-brooke)

The students know about this negative stereotype and work hard at changing the community's perception of their school. They feel the school is offering them hope. " My own personal goal is just to try and lift Papukura high school up, their spirit and to change the communities perception of what our school actually ain't "(Robert Downes)

This connection between school and community is central to the success of all students but especially for Maori. With a role of 60% Maori, and 20% Pasifika, the community has to get behind encouraging these students to be engaged in class, because in Mr Rohs' experience, this will encourage the rest of the students. 'If our rangatahi are engaged positively in class, then we know that the rest of the school will follow suit.'(Rohs)



Mr Rohs believes that education is a way out, ‘ the lever that is going to give them a sense of future, give them a life’. Growing up with such significant financial hardship is debilitating, family and parental stress is crippling, bad nutrition is disabling. ‘Stressed parents find it hard to offer their children optimism’. (Rashbrooke) These kids grow up with an “incredibly narrow view of the world and education has got to compensate for that”(Rohs).If parents had a bad schooling experience themselves , have to work two jobs to survive and need help with other siblings; school quickly becomes less of a priority.

‘ NCEA has made a massive difference in achievement standards of students from poorer homes, the qualifications allows more customization to individual students, their strengths and interests’ (Rasherbrooke).

Jayden a year 13 student talks about this in his experience at Papakura High, through finding drama as a subject “ I would count down the minutes till drama class....it was like therapy for me’. His teachers could see this bright kid but no one could deal with his behaviour. ‘ When he got into drama, that was a really big change and he was able to channel all that energy into something really positive.’(Mrs Fagan Year 13 Dean, Papakura High)

This customization of subjects and the right teacher support and guidance play such a massive factor in student achievement, giving students a safe, supportive and engaging schooling environment. Mr Rohs talks about ‘the most important thing for these kids is that they know that teachers are getting up every morning and coming to school and this gives them a sense of hope’.



Among the many concepts highlighted in 741, I focus these three as most powerfully connected to the analysis offered in *Under the Bridge*: income disparity, respecting diversity and the idea of other, all three of which shape and feed inequality and poverty. “Whose interest are really being served in education?” (Thrupp)

We have created an education system that benefits the middle class. Rising house prices, school zone systems all serve to reinforce that imbalance in school and make it seem inevitable. The documentary’s narratives illustrate this graphically. ‘Inequality and poverty are amongst the greatest challenges for the New Zealand education system’ (Rashbrooke) If we continue with this model of school zones with schools drawing up their own grids of who’s in and who’s out, it will become increasingly inevitable, thanks to a suffocatingly strong hold of middle class families and frightened politicians, too afraid to rock their voters’ boat. More and more kids from low income families will be locked out of the higher decile schools that enjoy a disproportionate share of resources and good teacher stability. ‘Education has a significant role in countering inequality and fostering opportunity.’ (Rashbrooke)

Income disparity is central to all of this . Education has become a force for changing and challenging the effects of this disparity. ‘The importance of education as an economic and social lever has grown, the indicators of success have narrowed. The idea of education preparing you for life has changed or been replaced by the notion of education inculcating literacy and numeracy to improve the work force and drive economic prosperity.’ (Ell&Grudnoff))

The current zoning system serves to cement this income disparity, imprisoning students by their parents’ address and wealth. Education potential becomes framed by post codes and pay packets. But this documentary proves that none of this need be inevitable if low decile schools can get their communities behind them and attract the right teachers.



The idea of the “other” - distancing those who don't fit your social world, is another powerful factor. In the documentary Mr Rohs shows how it's possible to turn this otherness to creative rather than alienating effect. As a Pakeha in a minority position, he uses that difference to enhance his role as a change agent and exploit the advantages to being other. Just how exactly? Well, he never pretends to be Maori or Pacifika, always acknowledges and social and cultural gap that does exist, but cultivates the role of bridge builder and communicator across the cultures.

Diversity is the final category I draw from 741. Mr Rohs celebrates it; attending Polyfest, attempting however imperfectly to speak all the languages of the students. The students we meet in the documentary recognize this and enjoy the permission he gives to celebrate this diversity. 'How diverse our school was, was kind of shrugged off where as Mr Rohs is kind of embracing it, its nice for us to see that cause he is not Poly'(Wendy Savieti)

Some key values and beliefs held at Papukura High that the documentary touched on :

Education is fundamental in getting kids out of poverty and giving them a sense of hope about their future.

The importance of whanau and community, bringing them in as active players in the education ' Most important thing is that whanau can walk through this school and get a sense that this school values who they are ' (Rohs)

Diversity should be celebrated.



One's social and cultural background need not be a barrier to becoming a change agent and effective educator. Building strong relationships, between teacher and students, principal and students as well as community and school, is crucial to educational achievement. Strategies need to be planned and developed to get each local community behind its local school. That will involve the community finding a greater sense that it is worthy and good.

Communities and schools are interconnected; one needs to support the other. Schools can't operate effectively in isolation from their surrounding community.

There are some connections I can draw from this documentary to both schools I did my practicum in. Mr Rohs made a committed effort to be part of the community of Papakura, he didn't have the luxury of a strong alumni base that higher decile schools enjoy and cultivate. My experience at Epsom Girls Grammar showed me just how strongly they rely on their alumni resource, in a way that Papakura doesn't begin to have. But that's a matter of history and inherited confidence. There is no reason why this can't happen for Papakura High.

Despite their huge social differences, both my practicum schools had a great understanding of cultural identity. It was fundamental to their Maoris and Pasifika students that they had an outlet and a community within the school to celebrate their culture and be part of bigger events like Polyfest.



References :

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