

EXPLORING DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES
EDPROF 741
JESSICA BLUCK



ST ANDREWS ANGLICAN CHURCH EPSOM



SAMOAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ONEHUNGA

Church

These two images from Epsom and Onehunga represent a major source of cultural capital in the two communities, expressed very differently. My time at Onehunga High was surprisingly rich in religious references. Students often asked me if I went to church. I learnt very quickly who were the children of ministers. Pretend praying was a common game, which gave students a reason to reprimand me for interrupting them. God was often referred to often in class, and became part of classroom banter, but never disrespectfully. Crosses were often made and drawn.

By comparison I don't recall a single religious reference during my whole time at Epsom Girls. If it was important to any of the students, it was never visible.

Yet in both these communities, church was an important institutional presence and source of social approval. In Epsom, St George's Anglican Church is the oldest and most important church building, built by George Selwyn, the first bishop and protected now by the state under historic places legislation. The rich and famous of Epsom get married, baptized and buried there. The families of most Epsom girls would have a personal connection with the place.

Religion for the Epsom Girls' school community, and especially the powerful group of old girls, is deeply entrenched and defining in their history, but seems never to be connected to the spirituality of the students. It was marginal at best, part of the status quo, but always in an implicit and hidden way, and anchored in the past.

In Onehunga, religion was out in the open. It shaped the spirituality of the students, was part of their everyday family life and central to connecting them with the wider community. A very present thing. The climate of the school made religion normal. In Epsom it was invisible or ignored, even though many of the Pasifika students there came from religiously involved families.

Why this difference? Is it because the poorer and more socially deprived backgrounds of Onehunga students still value religion as a source of pride, dignity, social connection, keeping the hope of justice alive. The precedent for Christianity as a force for justice has a long history.

With Maori, before the disastrous land wars of the 1860's, church life was a central and positive influence, especially in education and promoting literacy. 'the missionary legacy ensured that Maori had the tools, literacy and knowledge to take their place in the new world; and eventually, far from needing someone 'to smooth the pillow of a dying race, they would resist that false prophecy, pushing through to a world of possibilities; with the equal voice and fair deal they had been promised.' (Bible and Treaty, Keith Newman, Penguin, 2010, p. 321)

Pacifika, slightly later, embraced that missionary legacy even more enthusiastically, first in their home nations, and then in New Zealand in the latter twentieth century. Church became the most influential institution alongside the local school, working in close partnership. In my time at Onehunga I saw daily evidence of that continuing.

In Epsom, where church was a far less visible and influential presence, that hunger for justice and sense of struggle was nowhere near as evident. Students seemed content with their lot, even as though they were entitled to it.

The Samoan Presbyterian Church shares the building with the Co-operating Parish, a coalition of different denominations and at least four ethnic groups, where Palagi are a small minority of the 778 members on the roll. Like the school, the church is a model of cultural diversity. On the outside the church looks traditional and old New Zealand. On the inside it is a thriving reflection of what Auckland is now unlike St Georges, which is a monocultural memory of a colonial past.



EPSOM GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL
MAIN ENTRANCE



ONEHUNGA HIGH SCHOOL
MAIN ENTRANCE

School

The entrances to these two schools could not be more different. Onehunga plants itself firmly in the bicultural promise of New Zealand now. To enter the school you have walk under the waharoa (gateway) and even if the Tino Rangatiratanga flag of Maori sovereignty is not flying on the flagpole (yet), it does hang prominently in the window of the marae in front of you.

The entranceway to Epsom is a different story. You enter between walls of stone, once mined freely from nearby volcano that are now protected as sacred taonga. But identification with things Maori is minimal. A single sign points to the Maori Department, with an arrow pointing to the sky, but is actually part of the languages department, rather than anchored in some more fundamental priority.

Is this a reflection of the school's makeup? Epsom is largely Pakeha with a significant Asian and Pasifika presence whereas Onehunga is dominantly Maori and Pasifika. Or is there more systematic resistance to a bicultural and multicultural ethos? And as the cultural mix of Auckland becomes ever more diverse to the point where Pakeha will be a minority by the next generation, how well positioned is an educational leader like Epsom Girls to serve its future student body, knowing that for Maori and Pacifica students to succeed, their cultures have to be visibly acknowledged and celebrated. ' Classroom and school walls are valuable "advertising "space, and students learn important lessons from what is displayed there. Over time, they come to expect certain images, value what is present, and devalue that which is absent.'(Gay,2002)

Margaret J. Wheatley argues that finding hope in the future (which is so fundamental to what we are attempting in multi cultural education) requires "our willingness to be disturbed... to have our beliefs and ideas challenged by what others think our willingness to let go of our certainty and expect ourselves to be confused for a time."(Wheatley,2009)

My experience at Epsom Girls was all about avoiding anything that might disturb or confuse a system that was

Swalwell talks about the importance of understanding the impact of privilege in education which is growing as the rich-poor gap widens and the knock on effect it has. These students will go on to hold positions of power and consolidate that divide, unless critical thinking starts in the classroom and the privileged students learn to take risks and give themselves permission to make mistakes. At Epsom Girls, I realize in retrospect, that permission was rarely given, for fear of underachieving.

Far from acknowledging any sort of cultural diversity, the physical structures of Epsom's entrance speak of monocultural sameness. If you weren't middle class European, you would have to become 'the other' a term defined by Tatum (1997) as 'distancing those who don't fit into your social world' and taking many different ethnic, gender and class forms.

This construct of 'other' in our two schools is almost always cast in the form of ethnic and racial difference. Templeton reminds us that 'race is not a biological truth'(Templeton,1999) 'but rather a social construction that originated out of a desire to distribute power upon hierarchies that favored White over Black identities.'(Swalwell,2013)

If there is nothing in the school environment that visibly acknowledges the cultural differences, students will continue to be afraid of them. Epsom tolerates these differences inside the school, but not enough to enjoy them on the outside as you come in.

Onehunga's entrance in contrast, is deliberately rather than unconsciously designed to celebrate cultural diversity. The waharoa you walk under, the motifs on the marae façade, the flag in the window, the full frontal dominance of these structures that form the school's front door, all say that cultural diversity is literally part of the furniture here.

And what distinguishes the communities you come in from to enter these schools? What are the issues of equity and justice that they pose for the school to address? Epsom is a wealthy and stable suburb with a strong new Asian presence. It houses major city institutions like Greenlane Hospital, show-ground's, parks and race tracks.

Onehunga has no such centering institutions and is driven by a rapidly shifting demographic pushed by the Auckland house price explosion. Unlike Epsom, most families are renting and financially stretched, not helped by finance companies in the main street charging 38% interest and penalty payments exceeding 100%.

How do the two schools respond to these radically different social contexts?

Thrupp asks 'Whose interest are really being served in education?'(Thrup,2016) He describes the 'inconvenient truth ...that schooling long geared to the concerns and interests of the middle class is even increasingly so in some way.' (Thrup,2016)

Zoning polices and pedagogy measured by high marks and academic achievement make schools captive to doing the best they can with what they've got without asking too many questions about the communities they serve.

Neither of my schools were doing much by way of social questioning. Or interest in issues of poverty and justice. In Gorski's language their ideology was more about deficit 'poverty as something created by natural causes, human and inherited'(Gorski,2016)

than structural analysis which focuses on social systems like punishment and issues like housing.

Many of the resources we covered in our social justice paper advocated for teachers to become change agents pursuing goals of a fairer, more inclusive society. The New Zealand Curriculum is never explicit about these goals. Let alone how to achieve them. But it does affirm the values not only of cultural diversity but also 'equity through fairness and social justice'.

Translating that mandate into curricula is a huge challenge and one that the physical environment of the school does little to support.

References

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching. *Journal Of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022487102053002003>

Gorski, P. (2016). Poverty and the ideological imperative: a call to unhook from deficit and grit ideology and to strive for structural ideology in teacher education. *Journal Of Education For Teaching*, 42(4), 378-386. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1215546>

Newman, K. (2010). *Bible & treaty*. Auckland [u.a.]: Penguin Books.

Readings for diversity and social justice. (2000) (p. Chapter 1: The Complexity of identity by B.Tatum). New York, NY.

Swalwell, K. (2013). Educating activist allies : social justice pedagogy with the suburban and urban elite (p. Chapter 1).

Thrupp, M. (2016). Education's 'inconvenient truth': Persistent middle class advantage. *Waikato Journal Of Education*, 13(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15663/wje.v13i1.290>

Wheatley, M. (2009). *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*. Berrett-Koehler.