At The Hub Of It All: Knowledge Producing Schools as Sites For Educational and Social Innovation

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One of the potential shortcomings of the full-service model of schools as community hubs is the minimization or even neglect of the potential of community development and its presence in the school to animate and invigorate the school curriculum and vice versa. The history of progressive education is full of proponents of such efforts (Dewey, Freinet, Decroly, Ferrière, Makarenko, Freire, the Maïresse d'Ecole collective in Quebec). It is encouraging to see this returning in a contemporary setting in the work of Leonie Rowan and Chris Bigum in Australia. The following account of Knowledge Producing Schools gives one of the best recent accounts we have seen of the reciprocal value of children’s learning and community engagement. Communities learn that they have a vital role in what goes in school and schoolchildren learn to “do life,” as they say, and provide direct and tangible benefits to their communities, both within and beyond the school walls. It is here that the New Accountability can begin, freed from the tyranny of number games, phony statistics and meaningless exercises for an audience of one teacher and an Education Quality and Accountability Office.

INTRODUCTION

Few professions are subjected to the intense and relentless scrutiny so consistently directed at education. In a world characterized by rising public anxiety about a constantly changing present and a largely unpre-
dictable future, schools are regularly called upon to demonstrate that they are up to the challenge of preparing global citizens for whatever lies in their future. This article outlines one approach to conceptualizing the role of education in and for diverse possible futures. Reflecting upon both what has changed and what has not changed, for diverse students over the past 30 years, we put forward the concept of future proofing as a lens for reflecting upon the role, purpose and objectives of socially just, socially responsible public schooling. From this basis, the paper explores one framework for advancing a future proofing agenda: the work associated with a series of educational innovations known collectively as the Knowledge Producing Schools (KPS) project. After first outlining the kind of mindset that underpins KPS activities, we provide a range of examples of students in schools actively involved in knowledge production valued and valuable to their community. Our aim throughout is to emphasize the value of re-conceptualizing schools and communities, not as two worlds traveling parallel pathways destined never to meet, but as environments that, if brought together, have the potential to benefit all participants: including those who are historically most at risk of educational and social alienation.

The paper has four sections. In the first we look at the current context facing educators and the tension that is created by an awareness of both what has changed and what has not changed. In the second we outline what it is that the concept of ‘future proofing’ offers to those seeking to respond in genuinely innovative ways to both the new and the old in our education systems. In the third we explore the ways in which KPS agendas take up the future proofing challenge. And in the fourth and final section we provide examples of KPS in action.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE....

Even the most cursory analysis of contemporary education debates reveals an immediate and powerful tension. On the one hand, an increasingly widespread acknowledgement that “human capital” plays a central role in the development of a competitive, productive national economy challenges educational policy makers, administrators and politicians to demonstrate that the educational systems they are responsible for are capable of producing the kinds of graduates able to contribute to the social and economic well being of the nation. In the midst of recurring debates about “educational standards” and “global competitiveness”, governments throughout the world have increasingly sought to identify the new basics, essential learnings or key competencies that will best prepare children to live in a world characterized by rapid flows of information, money and people. While some aspects of this debate have focused on attempting to define the core characteristics of a “millennial learner” (Godwin-Jones, 2005; Jonas-Dwyer & Postpil, 2004) in order to ensure that curriculum and pedagogy is appropriate for a generation of “clickeratti”, an even more powerful line of argument has stressed the need for schools to get back to basics: to standardized, high stakes testing against clearly articulated benchmarks.

At the same time as they are challenged to demonstrate their commitment to globally recognized measures of educational quality, policy makers are also faced with the stark reality that while much in the world has definitely changed, many other things remain stubbornly - depressingly - the same. The students who were most at risk of educational alienation and failure in the 1980s are the same children who are most at risk of educational alienation and failure today. Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, from cultural minorities, from Indigenous families and from rural, regional and isolated communities are over-represented amongst those groups of students who struggle to achieve the increasingly scrutinized national and international benchmarks for achievement in literacy, numeracy, science, and information technology. In Australia, for example, most recent data suggests that more than 10% of all primary school students fail to achieve literacy and numeracy benchmarks in Year Three (Gillard, 2009). This may seem a reasonable statistic, but rates of failure are dramatically worse for some students than others. Fifteen percent of children in remote areas, 22% of Australia's Indigenous children, 38% of children in very remote areas, and 38% of students from low-socio-economic families consistently fail to meet national and international literacy and numeracy benchmarks (MCEETYA, 2009).

The short and long term consequences of educational alienation and failure are, of course, well documented. Early educational success supports engagement, school attendance and the development of literacy and numeracy ability. This encourages retention at school, which then
facilitates successful transitions into higher and further education. Educational level is connected, in turn, to a range of income, health and well-being measures with students who complete secondary school and students who undertake further study consistently experiencing a better quality of life. On the other hand, the students who struggle early in their schooling generally continue to struggle as they move through the system. Many of these pay a lifelong price. Students who fail to complete year 12 have an increased risk of depression, anxiety and poor physical health. They experience longer and more frequent periods of unemployment, and greater rates of welfare dependence. They display higher rates of high-risk behaviour including drug-taking and teenage parenting and demonstrate a lower sense of social interconnectedness (Hudson, Price, & Gross, 2009, January; KPMG Foundation, 2006).

Thus, while much in the world may, indeed, look, sound and move quite differently to the way things were five years ago (before YouTube and Facebook), 10 years ago (before iPods) or 30 years ago (before cheap, accessible desktop computers) for the most at-risk groups or individuals who inhabit this changing world, far too many things remain fundamentally unchanged. Much is made of the gap that appears to exist between generations often labelled as baby-boomers, Gen X or Gen Y. But overly eager attempts to define the ‘nature’ of different generations can obscure the fact that the differences within a generation can often be as significant as any differences between generations. Indeed, a poor, Indigenous boy living in the rural parts of Western Australia in 2010 arguably has more in common with the poor boy who was his father than he does with a rich, city dwelling white boy who may share the same birth date. As William Gibson has noted so frequently “the future is here. It’s just unevenly distributed.”

In other words, while focusing on all that has changed and all that continues to change, it is an obvious responsibility for those involved in the business of education to see to it that this focus does not obscure the equally important fact that not everyone inhabits the contemporary environment in the same way, or for the same reasons. All too often, discussions about education ‘for the future’ are hijacked either by debates about technology and its potential or by discussions of the need for a “globally competitive workforce.” This leads to a situation where the real purpose of schooling – preparing kids to perform with confidence and flair in a high-stakes world – is overrun by an obsession about preparing kids to perform compliantly and uniformly within a high-stakes testing regime.

FUTURE PROOFING IN EDUCATION: AN INSTANCE OF AUDACIOUS HOPE

Taken together, this awareness of what has changed, and what has not changed creates a very real challenge for educators and policy makers alike. It challenges us to identify the ways in which we can respond to new times without reproducing old patterns of educational success and failure, and it highlights the need for us to develop a both/and approach to educational reform: an approach that is able to combine a commitment to quality education with a commitment to equitable education. This challenge is well captured by Henry Giroux who explores the “audacity of educated hope”: an agenda premised upon a commitment to interrogating the purposes and processes of public education:

If formal education is to remain a site of critical thinking, collective work, and social struggle, public intellectuals and progressive social forces need to expand its meaning and purpose. That is, they need to define public and higher education as a resource vital to the moral life of the nation, open to working [with] people and communities whose resources, knowledge, and skills have often been viewed as marginal. The goal here is to redefine such knowledge and skills to more broadly reconstruct a tradition that links critical thought to collective action, human agency to social responsibility, and knowledge and power to a profound impatience with a status quo founded upon deep inequalities and injustices. (Giroux, 2009)

Giroux draws attention to the need for all educators to take up the challenges often assigned to those called public intellectuals and to work collectively to redefine what knowledge and skills are most likely to address deep seated social inequalities.

This, of course, is not a new struggle. Debates about the responsibilities and challenges, the opportunities and barriers associated with education for diverse students are long-standing and well-rehearsed and the
potential for schools to alienate particular children and families from the very earliest days of schooling is well-documented within social justice literature (Considine & Zappala, 2002; Rowan, 2001; Rowan, Gauld, Cole-Adams, & Connolly, 2007; Sparke, 1999, November) (National Economic and Social Development Office, 2009). So, too, is the disturbing lack of progress that has occurred during the past 20 years (Harding, Lloyd, & Greenwell, 2001; Heymann, 2000; Kim, 2009).

But while the seemingly irresistible pressures of educational standardisation threatens to swamp educators throughout the world, there are many – like Giroux – who remain both passionately committed to the agendas of social justice and optimistic about the potential for change. Ten years into the twenty-first century, with its ever increasing emphasis on ‘competition’ and ‘efficiency,’ these educators have never been more challenged to identify frameworks for evaluating the extent to which their plans, projects and outcomes are contributing in any significant way to “future proofing” the individual – and diverse – students they are working for, and together with.

We use the term future proofing here, to signal, not any sort of belief in a simple, guaranteed or magic formula that can be used to ensure educational, economic and social success across the board, but rather, as a way of clearly and unashamedly signalling our own audacious hope: that schools committed to high standards and high aspirations can use this commitment to respond to the diverse needs of students and their teachers. This draws attention not only to academic success (as it is often defined in dominant discourses of schooling) but also to personal and social success in the diverse worlds that exist beyond the school walls.

We therefore define future proofing as a commitment to providing students with the kinds of robust and durable skills and dispositions that equip them to cope with increasing levels of change and uncertainty (as well as increasing political and ideological tension). Future proofing – as an educational vision – endorses attempts to provide all students with the opportunity to develop, rehearse and display:

- Strong literacy and numeracy skills.
- Excellent multi-literacy skills including high-level capacities in the ‘new basics’ of ICT.
- Operational, cultural, critical literacy.
- An understanding of what a changed and changing social and economic environment means for their present and their future (career, relationships, family and health).
- The ability to live harmoniously in a community characterised by social and cultural diversity.
- The potential to contribute to the social, emotional, intellectual and financial future of the nation.
- A strong sense of self, and a positive attitude towards change and life long/life wide learning.

This is an ambitious suite of claims, and one that is not dissimilar to the agenda-setting rhetoric of governments and educational agencies throughout the world: rhetoric which has, in the past decade, brought lots of ‘change’ into the lives of teachers but little actual innovation in terms of outcomes achieved. Here we are distinguishing between projects that can be identified as chronologically new – and thus, perhaps, an invention in the literal sense of the word – and those that can be characterized as intellectually and pedagogically innovative. The persistence of uneven outcomes from public education reminds us that there are important differences that exist between changing things, and changing outcomes. As Rowan (2007) has written elsewhere:

the label ‘innovative’ might now be most meaningful to educators if it was applied to those processes, products or interventions that have changed in some way the precise ‘things’ that have historically proven most resistant to sustained, sustainable change. To be ‘innovative’, in this sense, would require not only (nor even) some of the more traditional hallmarks of innovation – chronological ‘newness’, the addition of technology, or the creation of new market opportunities – but rather some fundamental transformation, interrogation, or interruption of long standing patterns of educational access and success. (p. 128)

With an emphasis on the need for educational practices to take up the challenge of innovation in ways that address seemingly intractable problems relating to educational success and failure, our goal in the next sec-
tion of this paper is to outline one framework for educational innovation that has much to offer in this regard: knowledge producing schools.

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCING SCHOOLS

The framework we are speaking of is known as the Knowledge Producing Schools – KPS – project. Growing out of the writings of Chris Bigum and the inspiration of a small number of school principals, the KPS agenda offers a practical way of implementing a future proofing agenda that responds to both what has changed, and what has not changed, in the contemporary educational landscape.

The key feature differentiating KPS projects from many other reforms is the emphasis on disrupting the traditional relationships that underpin so much of contemporary and past school practices. The traditional relationships between schools and knowledge, between schools and teachers, between teachers and students and between students and their community have produced a particular set of educational practices suited to those students who possess the cultural capital necessary for “doing school”. Working to improve the outcomes of schooling more broadly requires attention to the ways in which we give students the opportunities to get good at “doing life”.

Founder of the Knowledge Producing Schools framework, Chris Bigum, argues that the starting point for the knowledge producing school is the belief that one of the key ways in which educators can confront the challenges posed by unpredictable futures and changing context explored above is to look, as a beginning, at the ways in which schools’ – and students’ – relationships with knowledge has changed (Bigum, 2000, 2002a, 2002b). The emergence of a so-called knowledge economy means that students need to be actively involved in the production of knowledge about particular topics from the earliest possible age.

This is a key shift. Historically schools have been positioned largely as the consumers of knowledge produced by external experts. Thus we study biology through textbooks written by biologists, and literature by debating the writing within a ‘canon’ identified by other experts. This provides (at least some) students with excellent opportunities to demonstrate their ability to acquire knowledge but does not necessarily support the development of a positive relationship between these students and knowledge production. It also has the potential to validate those students who are already familiar with the most routinely endorsed forms of knowledge providing a series of reminders about who does, and who does not, possess the cultural capital to do well within traditional school tasks.

In order to disrupt the traditional relationship between schools and knowledge it is necessary at the same time to make a shift from seeing students as the consumers of knowledge to representing them as the producers of knowledge. This, in turn, requires a fundamental re-thinking of the kind of work that students do within school contexts.

The KPS framework emphasizes the value of real world tasks (we define the concept of ‘real world’ below) for developing in students, not only the traditional capacity to collect and make sense of existing bodies of knowledge, nor even simply the capacity to take this knowledge and apply it to a new problem or project. Rather students are routinely positioned as the source of new knowledge: knowledge that has relevance to the students themselves. In other words, KPS projects do not limit themselves to providing students with opportunities to show that they can undertake research that, in reality, no one cares about. Instead, KPS projects go beyond these “fridge door” tasks (with their audience of one or two parents and one or fewer teachers), to involve students in work on authentic tasks which have relevance and appeal to a wider community.

The starting point for the KPS agenda, then, is that students need to be involved in the production of knowledge about particular topics (not just in the consumption or reproduction of knowledge). This is achieved through work on authentic tasks relevant to the worlds inhabited by the students.

These real world activities are student-driven, but fundamentally connected to the diverse worlds that students inhabit. In other words, they are able to recognise and respond to the needs, desires and priorities of particular communities.

Involving students in the development of knowledge that is connected to various educational and social communities almost automatically provides them with an audience for their work beyond the artificial boundaries often drawn around schooling. Indeed, a hallmark of the KPS agenda is that students work on real world tasks with real world audiences. The responses they get to their knowledge work are provided by people with a genuine stake in the knowledge that is produced.
Clearly, managing this interacting between students and the ‘real world’ requires teachers who are able and willing to create substantial and ongoing partnerships with communities beyond the school. This is another key shift. In times of crisis and over-regulation, schools are often encouraged to turn inwards and to erect further barriers between what they are doing and the communities they are part of. The KPS framework, however, prioritises the establishment of relationships within and beyond traditional boundaries. Working on authentic tasks connected to real world projects, requires access to expertise in the particular real world field of activity (to provide intellectual rigour and authentic feedback). Students are encouraged to bring the expertise they have access to in their families, neighbourhoods and other environments into their KPS projects.

There are clear resonances between the KPS agenda and the work of other educational leaders. Fred Newman and Gary Wehlage have outlined the value of “authentic tasks” and “authentic pedagogy” – providing students with the opportunity to work on projects “that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful, such as those undertaken by successful adults” (Newman, 1996 p. 23). This work has had international impact and certainly shaped the productive pedagogies movement that was popular during the 2000s in Australia.

Of course, well before the work of Newman and Wehlage became popular, Célestin Freinet outlined an approach to pedagogy which was premised on similar principles. Freinet emphasised:

The pedagogy of work wherein students were encouraged to learn by making products and providing services. He emphasized the value of enquiry-based and cooperative learning; taking children’s interests and curiosity as the starting point for projects; the value of the “natural method” which involves authentic learning through real experiences and principles of democracy, as children learn to take responsibility for their work, and, indeed, for the community through processes of democratic government. (*History of Freinet Pedagogy*)

And of course, many progressive education projects throughout the world have sought to engage one or more of these agendas.

KPS projects do not seek to distinguish themselves from these important movements, nor to set the knowledge-producing agenda up as an entirely separate, stand-alone model. Rather, the KPS framework offers a new lens for conceptualising and reflecting upon transformative educational projects by paying consistent attention to five key questions:

- Are students positioned as the producers or the consumers of knowledge?
- Are students positioned as active or passive?
- Are students provided with a real world audience?
- Do all students and all forms of knowledge have a chance to be valued?
- Does this audience facilitate their connection to a broader community?

There are two further points to be made. KPS projects focus on the identification and response to real-world challenges. As such, they generally involve students in the development of real world relationships and work on real world tasks. By extension, the work necessarily contains an element of uncertainty and risk. The certainty provided by ‘schooled’ versions of discovery – where teachers control not only what, but how and when children learn – is removed. The benefits, however, are that students learn to identify and negotiate far more meaningful and complicated environments. While the stakes are higher, the results – in terms of student engagement and transferable, lifelong skills – are much bigger.

Within these broad parameters schools implement KPS projects in a multiplicity of ways. This is an important point. Even within the most conceptually innovative framework, schools can fail to meet the needs of diverse learners by positioning them as a homogenous group who will all benefit from the same set of educational practices. To avoid this situation each KPS project needs to be based upon an analysis of where students are at: what their existing strengths and weaknesses are; what they are interested in and motivated by; and what kinds of community and other resources they have access to.
KNOCKED PRODUCING SCHOOLS IN ACTION: STORIES FROM THE FIELD

While we can list characteristics and checklists for doing this kind of work, the bottom line is that it is more a matter of having a particular sensibility, a mindset towards kids and schooling that is probably best captured in some of the stories we offer below. In providing this small selection of examples drawn from a range of schools throughout Australia, we want to affirm that there is no one way to do this kind of work nor are there simple templates that one might adapt and adopt. The schools from which the examples are taken don’t see their students as most schools do. They see their students as resources, as researchers, as knowledge workers. There are so many opportunities in schools in which students could be given so much more responsibility than they normally are. Here we don’t mean the largely tokenistic practices in which students do things like conduct school assemblies or provide the labour for cleaning up school grounds. We mean taking each student as capable, talented and having much to offer in the day-to-day work of a school – and its community – as the following examples indicate.

Over a decade ago, our introduction to this approach to doing school differently occurred when Chris was invited to a professional development day by the principal of a primary school. The school had been given some funding to promote the use of IT in the classroom and with the funding a requirement to support local schools. Chris arrived at the school and was taken to a small room in which were located a set of tables arranged in a circle and on each table an iMac. The room was full of principals from neighbouring schools. The principal of the school spoke briefly and welcomed them. The IT coordinator spoke briefly and introduced the professional development team. Into the room walked Year Four students. They ran the PD. Watching these young people patiently work with principals in suits as they sat on the floor and argued about the positioning of plasticine figures while producing their first claymation movie was simply inspirational. During the day the students taught movie making and sound editing: practices that had become routine in many of the classes in the school. Another example linked to this was that the principal was invited to give a presentation to a principals’ conference about the IT in her school and locally. Her reaction to the invitation was to take it to a Year Six class and explain what was required. The students shot video footage in this and nearby schools, edited the footage into a coherent story, burned the CD and gave the presentation at the conference.

Some years later, Chris was meeting with a principal of North Park PS in Victoria, Australia. She had been mentioned by a colleague who felt she might be interested in KPS ideas. He arrived at her office after school. It was still a busy time of the day for her. There were interruptions most of the time they talked. She was also busy preparing a presentation to a principal’s conference about an innovative approach the school had developed about behaviour management. When Chris told her the story about the students making the presentation she leapt from her chair and gave him a big hug. Her problem was solved. Her students prepared the presentation and gave it at the principals’ conference.

Some months later, the same school was invited, along with another school, to host a visit by OECD dignitaries. At the first school that was visited, the principal welcomed the delegation who then met with staff over a cup of tea and were subsequently shown around the school. When the bus carrying the delegation arrived at North Park, there was a line of Year Three students along the path into the school. As each member of the delegation alighted from the bus they were greeted individually by a student who escorted them inside, attended to their food, drink and bathroom needs and then gave them a personal tour of the school.

These examples point to a pervasive logic that you find in KPS schools – when there is knowledge work to be done, first consider whether kids can do it before taking the usual path and assigning a teacher to do the work. Once a school begins to think along the lines of encouraging and supporting students to perform serious work, work that they know matters to adults, then new kinds of relationships become possible with local communities.

In 2003, Year Six students in a regional area in Australia worked with the local cattle-sale yards to produce a documentary of the history of the sale yards. The product CD was used at two international beef festivals and by the local council to promote the region. In this type of work, expertise about cattle, even about making a good quality video about them, is usually not found in a school. The students planned and negotiated a series of interviews with cattle farmers and stock agents. They
conducted the interviews and negotiated access to film footage that the industry had produced to provide background images during some of the interviews.

In another project, a town with a gold-mining history sought and obtained funds to promote tourism in the town. They decided to produce touch screen tourist information kiosks. The local school was filled with poor, isolated and ‘at risk’ students. These students worked in consultation with a school that had been doing KPS work for many years and ultimately negotiated, scripted and carried out interviews with local “characters” of the town who knew a good deal about local history and events. The town was not confident that the student product would be good enough and so commissioned a commercial company to do the same work at the same time, in the belief that they would probably end up using the professional product for public display. But when you visit the town, it is the student work you see on the touch screens.

The logic underpinning this example is that students in poor, isolated or disadvantaged areas do not need to be conceptualised in terms of what they don’t have. The students in this school did have plenty of skills: they had a connection to their town, and they produced an innovative product for a highly appreciative audience. Their skills were valued, they gained confidence as learners, and saw themselves no longer as the passive consumers of a curriculum written by ‘experts’ or people who knew better.

Another example illustrates the capacity of children to take the lead in identifying how to respond proactively to real world challenges. In response to a class incident, a group of Year Seven students designed and produced a PowerPoint-based CD to offer advice to students about bullying. They scripted, filmed and edited six scenarios each with three alternative outcomes to illustrate the consequences of what they labeled ‘weak’, ‘aggressive’, and ‘cool’ responses to a bully. They launched the interactive CD at a public meeting at the school and marketed the CD to other schools.

Recently, a KPS school whose history dates back to 1877, launched a History Tour. Carrying out work on their history is not uncommon in many schools. In this case, the history was researched, written and told by students. The project ran over three years and features an iPod tour, historical plaques, a guidebook and souvenirs. The students prepared advertising flyers, met and made presentations to a range of local community groups seeking their support and sought local business support to fund the support materials of the tour. Students located and negotiated interview access to a number of elderly prior students of the school. They prepared the questions, conducted the interview and video-recorded it. The students designed a survey to gather information from past students. They used the information they received in preparing a guide book and for the audio scripts to be delivered via an iPod. Following the launch, the students made presentations to community groups and to the local historical society who, having seen the quality of their work, are planning to take up the iPod and plaque ideas in their work. The tour continues to run weekly on the school site.

In a KPS secondary school, Year Eight students had attended a local book launch about strange and unusual tales in the town where the school was located. The students began to work on a notion of a tour that would in some way pick up on and further develop some of the places identified in the book. They researched whether there would be demand for such a tour and what other sources of information were available. They met with an officer from the local council, the local council library and the visitors’ information centre for the town. They learned that, if they produced a tour, having a Japanese version would be important. The students began researching potential sites and settled on ten for which they researched and wrote stories about the ghosts and the history of the buildings in which they were said to reside. They learned GPS theory and built a GPS tour after coming up against the proprietary data formats employed by companies that sell GPS location devices. They rehearsed the tour with the town council’s marketing and tourism officer (the author of the book that had prompted their interest) and members of the local historical society. They collected photographs, shot video footage of the locations as source material for a brochure to accompany the GPS tour and the MP3 accounts. The final product attracted local TV and radio coverage at its launch and is now a popular tourist attraction in the town. We include a short sample from the brochure:

The home stands on the corner of Mary and Arthur Streets and has its own resident ghost, believed to be an old housekeeper who closes and locks all of the doors in the hallway.
The mysterious dweller is said to wear a grey dress and carry a large set of keys on her leather belt. Each night after 10pm and until the early hours of the morning, she reportedly walks the wide elegant hallways.

Staff members of the building deliberately leave doors open only to hear them being closed behind them.

In these examples, drawing in and on local expertise is an important characteristic. Project work is common enough in all schools but it typically enjoys a limited audience. We’ve coined the term ‘fridge door assignments’ to underline the difference between work that has an audience of two or three and that which enjoys a much wider appeal. It can only enjoy a wider audience if students have access to mature insider forms of practice akin to the knowledge production practices of specialist communities identified by Moore (2001). Access to specialist communities for some knowledge has improved as a consequence of the very low cost of organising via the Internet (Shirky, 2008). Some teachers in KPS schools have joined online specialist communities, for instance astronomy, as a means of providing expertise to support projects in areas that students have wanted to pursue.

This is another important point. KPS projects are believed by their participants to improve both student engagement and student achievement. This is not because students are always working on what interests them the most, or because they get to play around with new technologies. There are plenty of instances where technologically mediated projects and so called “passion projects” result in students being bored, disengaged and turned off. The distinguishing feature of a KPS initiative is that, regardless of whether there is technology to be used, or an individual’s passion to be responded to, all participants have sustained opportunities to develop and demonstrate expertise to real audiences.

Aspects of KPS work are familiar to most teachers. It is not difficult to find the ideas of thinkers such as Dewey’s authentic, democratic pedagogy, Freire’s praxis-oriented pedagogy and Freinet’s pedagogy of work, in the pedagogy of KPS work. What we think is interesting about this work is the new relationships that students negotiate with specialist groups, local communities and their school in achieving outcomes that can be seen to be significant and useful contributions to local community interests and needs.

CONCLUSION

The stories outlined above are not intended to speak to all of the challenges facing every educator everywhere throughout the world. Quite the contrary. The strength of the KPS mindset is that it allows educators to recognise and respond to the specific circumstances – the specific communities, experts, needs and desires – of their local environment. What binds the diverse activities that result together, however, is the unrelenting commitment to finding spaces to transform the relationships between children and teachers; children and knowledge; children and their community. And most important of all, between children and success. Within a knowledge-producing schools project children – all children – are not taught how to be good at ‘doing school’. Rather, and most importantly of all, they learn and are supported, by the community they are so very much a part of, to be good at doing life.

ENDNOTES

1 A variant of this was said by Gibson in an NPR interview on the 30th November 1999 (http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1067220).

2 These were the fruit-coloured iMacs released in 1999.

3 Typically care-givers and the classroom teacher.

REFERENCES


ability, making environmental learning a central part of community life. Addressing climate change is now widely considered to be the most urgent issue confronting all of humanity. Today’s young people deserve an education that allows them access to the knowledge and skills to become both economically and environmentally wise in the face of change. Transforming our schools into centres of green learning and practice is a way of offering today’s young people a new promise for the future.