

If we have a commitment to social justice, what is it in adult maths / numeracy education that we think is worth fighting for?

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This paper is a response to the question posed to the author by the conference organisers: “if we have a commitment to social justice, what is it in adult maths/ numeracy education that we think is worth fighting for”. The paper argues that a commitment to social justice requires adult mathematics and numeracy educators and researchers to look outwards and think of themselves as social activists who work with other social movements to build strengths for sustainable and progressive social change.

When I was asked to respond to the question: “if we have a commitment to social justice, what is it in adult maths/ numeracy education that we think is worth fighting for?” my first reaction was to say, “there are bigger and more important things to be worrying about than adult maths if we are really concerned about social justice”. This reaction was influenced by the timing of the request to speak and respond to the question. The request came in the same week as when the Australian government announced a set of radical Higher Education Workplace Reform Requirements (HEWRRs) (Department of Education, Science and Technology, 2005) that advances the Government’s commitment to increased privatisation, individualism and competition, and anti-union agenda. This seemed to be yet another assault on efforts of educators, unions and other groups committed to increasing social justice in Australia. Although my initial response was not helpful in addressing the question posed to me, it forced me to reflect deeply on how I needed to think adult mathematics and numeracy to see a connection between what the adult mathematics and numeracy community does and social justice.

In this paper, I will first present how we can begin to conceptualise the relationship between the adult mathematics and numeracy community and social justice initiatives. I will then give examples of approaches taken by other movements and groups, and use some of the guiding principles of sustainable development to provide some more concrete direction for thinking about social justice, and the implications of how the adult mathematics and numeracy community might work on the broader project of social justice. Finally, I will conclude by proposing some general directions that might help the adult mathematics and numeracy community remain relevant and achieve its social justice objectives in a sustainable and productive manner.

I preface the rest of the paper by saying that this paper draws heavily on my knowledge and experiences working as an academic and adult teacher educator, and also as a union activist in Australia. This means that the paper is not comprehensive in its reference to what is happening in the adult mathematics and numeracy community, nor necessarily balanced in the focus of issues that it discusses. However, I believe, unfortunately, that many of the problems and challenges I describe about the Australian context will probably resonate with readers working outside Australia as well.

How can the field of adult mathematics and numeracy interact with social justice?

The field of adult mathematics and numeracy, although focussed around the mathematics and numeracy education of adults involves not only teaching and learning, but also research and policy development. A commitment to social justice by the adult mathematics and numeracy education community (ALM, for short) must then be committed to foregrounding social justice in all three of these activities.

Making a commitment to social justice requires an “unpacking” of this concept. Many of the ALM activities such as bridging mathematics and adult basic education focus on increasing access to further learning. In Australia, the pedagogies that underpin these programs embrace principles of equity and inclusiveness, which in turn lead to learners participating in the programs to achieve a sense of empowerment. Maintaining a focus on the needs of individual learners has become more difficult in Australia because of increasing measures to improve accountability and transferability of qualifications, which have led to standardisation of curricula, including the proliferation of training packages (national guidelines for vocational training qualifications). Despite these developments, many teachers in the field have continued to apply humanistic principles to ensure that their learners achieve a sense of

empowerment as a result of their participation in learning. The effects of different pedagogical strategies and policy changes on learning and teachers' work are the subject of research in adult mathematics and numeracy education. Looking at the field in this way, we could draw the conclusion that there is already a strong commitment to social justice across the ALM community and that there is nothing further that needs to be done. Figure 1 shows a map of the connection that can be made between ALM and social justice goals.

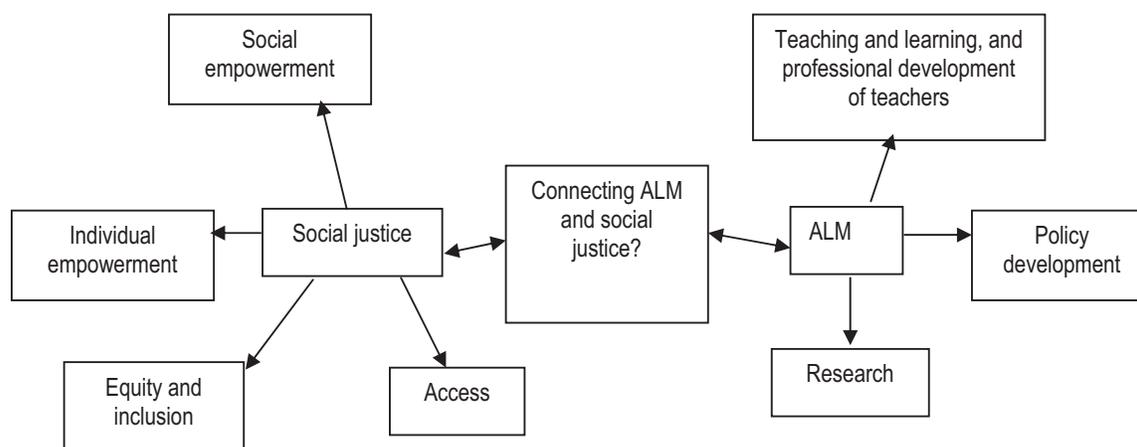


Figure 1. Connecting ALM and social justice

There are two reasons why further consideration is needed in considering the connection between the ALM community and social justice goals. Firstly, one needs to reflect on whether any type of individual empowerment is necessarily an indicator of social justice. If George W. Bush becomes more empowered through increased literacy and numeracy and as a result becomes capable of writing his own speeches and policy frameworks, can we say that there has been some incremental increase made in social justice? That is, do cases of individual empowerment necessarily lead to communities and societies being more empowered? Secondly, if the focus is on greater participation and individual empowerment, then one could argue that in Australia, this is precisely what the Federal Government is trying to achieve. There is a strong Government rhetoric of increasing flexibility and “choice” (usually through increasing private providers) for learners so that more can get skilled and be employed to fill the skills shortages facing the country. The Australian government is keen on increasing participating in learning, but learning primarily for its own agenda, and not necessarily for the community's benefit. When adult learning is focussed only on vocational ends, at the possible expense of the broader benefits of participation in learning, does it necessarily advance social justice?

A helpful framework to consider how learning contributes to social justice is the conceptual model developed by Schuller et al (2004, in Kearns, 2005, pp.28-29). This model identifies the interaction and intersection between three forms of capital. They are: human capital which refers to “the knowledge and skills possessed by individuals”; social capital which refers to “the networks and norms which enable people to contribute effectively to common goals”; and identity capital which refers to “the characteristics of individuals that define his or her outlook and self esteem”, and it is suggested that developments of all three forms of capital are crucial in sustaining both individuals and communities (Kearns, 2005, p.28). That is, we cannot just focus on the human and identity capitals in thinking about social justice.

Threats and lessons for the ALM community

Achieving and then *sustaining* social justice outcomes will be a major challenge for any socially progressive movements. It is probably fair to say that in comparison to many other countries around the world, Australia rates highly in social justice indicators compared to many other countries. What is concerning for many activists in Australia is that the country is going backwards through the Government policies that are, for example, anti-union, anti-refugee, pro-privatisation, and pro-competition.

It is not that educators and researchers in the ALM community have suddenly woken up to the neo-conservative agenda of the governments in Australia, U.S.A. and elsewhere. Rather, even in these hostile environments, many adult maths/ numeracy programs and initiatives – both in teaching and research, continue to respect and enact principles of social justice. There continues to be programs and initiatives focussing on increasing access to education and employment through bridging and adult basic education programs; devising inclusive and learner-centred pedagogies in our teaching so that all of our learners can learn in a safe and productive learning environment; researching numeracy as social practice so that many different numeracy practices can be

acknowledged and inform teaching and learning; promoting critical mathemacy/numeracy/mathematical literacy in our curricula so that our learners engage with the politics of knowledge and knowledge generation (Coben et al, 2000; Kelly et al, 2004). And of course, these activities need to continue. But where, and how?

Figure 2 presents one snapshot of how the ALM community might look to an outsider. However well we as teachers, learners, researchers and policy experts fulfil their part, and however committed we may be to social justice principles, the ALM community, even internationally is not a large enough community to influence and reverse socially regressive forces from neo-conservative governments. Within the sort of environment that exists now, a small community that has traditionally worked and achieved its goals as a “closed” system is vulnerable to eradication. This is not a criticism of the ALM community. Much larger and more established groups are facing and feeling the same threat, for example, trade-unions in the Australian context.

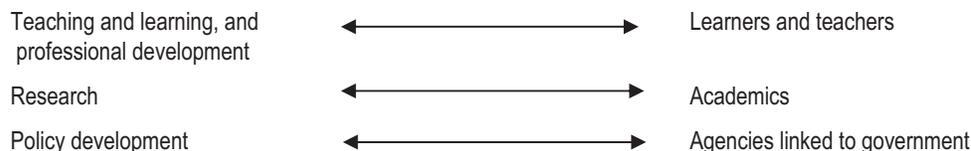


Figure 2. A snapshot of the ALM community – a closed system?

In the trade union that I am involved in, we are faced with some new policies and legislation that can easily make us irrelevant and eradicate us. The Federal government is making it compulsory for universities to introduce changes that significantly diminish the role of the union in negotiating conditions through collective bargaining, having an active part in institutional policy development, and representing and protecting the rights of staff. The traditional methods of recruiting members are also under threat because of new limitations on right of entry of union officials on campus and use of university facilities. We are facing a period when union strength is more important than ever before, but we need to build strengths within a climate where there are the most draconian restrictions in terms of exercising our industrial muscle. In this sort of environment, workers who rely on union officials and paid staff to solve their workplace grievances and other problems for them will become instantly powerless because the legal frameworks that allow for union intervention in the local workplace affairs are being severely restricted.

So in our union, as in many other Australian trade unions, we are rapidly reinventing ourselves not according to a “servicing” model that we had grown used to, but according to an “organising” model where the focus is on building activism at the rank and file. If legislations are introduced to stop the legal avenues currently available to us, then we have to be able to apply our collective political strengths to fight agendas that threaten us in the workplace, and not rely on paid “experts” to fight the fight for us. And the “organising” model extends outwards – from the local branch of a trade union to the union’s other branches, to other unions, and to other community based organizations, and any other allies that we can find to build a solidly grounded base to present challenges to regressive policies.

I argue that the idea of an “organising” model is also relevant to groups like the ALM community. If as teachers, researchers and policy analysts, we are committed to social justice, then we have to find ways to ensure that their commitment can be realised and sustained not just during the working lives of the current ALM community members, but beyond that. This must be sustained not just through what ALM “experts” can provide either, but through more widely dispersed strengths and resources.

The thought of building wider networks and negotiating agendas can overwhelm teachers and researchers. The thought of doing something on top of keeping existing programs going will seem like a death sentence in itself. But there are examples of successes gained through such approaches. In the state of New South Wales in Australia, adult basic education teachers, their union, students, and other community based groups worked together in 2003 to defeat the introduction of fees in TAFE (Technical and Further Education) for access courses (Hazell, 2004). In this campaign, teachers had to quickly mobilise support from students and other stakeholders, and they succeeded. There are also many examples in the literature on school and community partnerships where schools, community groups and parents have worked together to achieve shared community aspirations (see for example, Gregory et al, 2004; Maurrasse, 2004; Wasik, 2004). At a more global level, one can look at the World Social Forum where people from all over the world come together to discuss ways of creating a different world!

If we remain as a small and closed system, then we are vulnerable to eradication through changes in funding of programs we are involved in, outsourcing of our work, changes in research priorities, and so forth. However, if we are linked to a larger social movement that shares our broad social justice goals, and it in turn is linked to other social

movements, then it is possible for these movements to mobilise support across the different fields, and make ourselves less easy to “pick off”.

To organise and build strengths in solidarity with other progressive groups and social movements, the ALM community (and these other groups) will need to articulate its core values and goals in a language that can be shared and understood by the broader community. This also means that some of the language of social justice needs to be rearticulated and reclaimed from the neo-conservatives that have appropriated social justice notions to advance their agenda. These include:

- Fairness
- Right to work
- Flexibility
- Choice
- Right to work

What it means to achieve and sustain social justice is expressed in the principles of sustainable development. Although there are many expressions of the principles of sustainable development, one key principle is that it is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Bruntland, 1987). The term sustainable development started to become part of our everyday language after the *Bruntland Report* or *Our Common Futures* report of the World Commission on Environment and Development was published (Bruntland, 1987). Following this report, there emerged a number of principles of ecological sustainability. Although there have been different variations of these principles, there is an understanding that sustainable development is about both environmental and social justice, and that this involves not only justice in terms of quality of life, access to resources, natural and cultural diversity, and political rights across all people now, but also across generations (Goldie et al, 2005). That is, intergenerational equity (as well as intragenerational equity) is a central tenet in ecological sustainable development. This means that we have a responsibility to build strengths in order that future generations of adult mathematics and numeracy teachers, researchers, policy analysts and learners can enjoy at least the same level of benefits that the current generation has enjoyed.

Some directions

This is not the first, and is unlikely to be the last period in history where the adult numeracy and mathematics education community is faced with the challenges of a social regressive political climate. In order to achieve and sustain our social justice commitments, we need to look outwards and work with others to build a larger and stronger network in which adult numeracy and mathematics education plays an important and critical role. The network will have to work towards building three forms of capital – human, social and identity capital that will lead to sustained individual and social empowerment. In this project, we need to think of ourselves not only as adult mathematics and numeracy teachers, researchers and/ or policy analysts, but also as social activists within a broader social movement.

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