

Educational Disadvantage and the Community of Inquiry

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Introduction

Everyone here has an interest in addressing educational disadvantage and many of you will already be familiar with the idea of the classroom Community of Inquiry. Even so, I would like to begin by addressing the terms that define my subject for today. I do so not just to minimize misunderstanding, but because our conception of things provides a foundation for the approach that we take to practical affairs, making it well worthwhile to try to conceive of these things in the most productive way from the beginning.

A disadvantage is an unfavourable condition or circumstance that acts to the detriment or loss of those who suffer it. So an educational disadvantage is an unfavourable condition or circumstance that is responsible for educational impairment. Such conditions can be conceived of as either a *deficit* suffered by the disadvantaged—such as poverty, parental neglect or lack of adequate educational provision—or else as a *disparity* between the background culture and values that characterise the student's out-of-school life-world and those of the school. The conception of educational disadvantage in terms of deficits that are basically beyond the control of the school is no doubt of value to governments, social workers and central educational administrators, but it is not empowering for classroom teachers who desire to address disadvantage. For them, the discrepancy between the background of the student and the culture of the school rises to the fore. That is a more useful conception. It allows teachers to put their minds to ways of addressing educational disadvantage that are within their means.

The term 'Community of Inquiry' was coined by the American educationalist Matthew Lipman to denote the combination of inquiry-based and collaborative learning that lies at the heart of his Philosophy for Children program for schools. The idea has its distant origins in the 1870s in Charles Sanders Peirce's conception of the worldwide scientific community of inquirers and finds fuller expression in John Dewey's insistence that thinking, taken as inquiry, should be central to school education and the emphasis that his democratic conception of education places upon community.¹ At its narrowest, the term refers to engaging students in a Lipman-inspired philosophy session, as when teachers talk about 'doing a Col'. At its broadest, it denotes a classroom where the emphasis upon collaborative

¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, 'The fixation of belief' (<http://www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html>) and John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Chapters 7 and 12 (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Democracy_and_Education).

and inquiry-based teaching and learning has transformed it into an inquiring community, thereby giving expression to a Deweyan conception of education as a whole.

If the idea of the Community of Inquiry is to prove useful to teachers who are attempting to address educational disadvantage, it is clear that something approaching the broader conception is to be preferred. While there is some evidence that the inclusion of sessions devoted to collaborative philosophical inquiry can have a surprisingly large effect upon educational outcomes, something more comprehensive would be required to bridge the gap between the backgrounds of disadvantaged students and the official culture of our schools. We would need to transform the classroom into one that can accommodate the disadvantaged student's background experience and life-world while generating an improvement in educational outcomes. The question before us is whether converting the classroom into a Community of Inquiry can take disadvantaged students on board and deliver the goods.

Considering the Evidence

Before considering what benefits the Community of Inquiry may hold for disadvantaged students, I should first address the charge that departures of this kind do not work for the standard student cohort, let alone the disadvantaged one. While it would take us too far afield to enter into detailed debate, it needs to be acknowledged that inquiry-based teaching has been placed on a list of dubious pedagogies by some critics.² They argue that analysis of a range of studies provides empirical proof of the ineffectiveness of such approaches. Three responses need to be made. First, it is important not to lump together the various kinds of approaches that go under the heads of discovery learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning, as pedagogies that provide minimal guidance to students, as these critics have done. In particular, to criticise the Community of Inquiry in this way would be to attack a straw man. Even in its narrowest sense, the Community of Inquiry depends upon the use of scaffolding to structure the inquiry process, including Discussion Plans, procedural questioning, and targeted exercises and activities. In the Community of Inquiry, teachers pay careful attention to such things as students' question formation, attempts at justification, reasoning and their use of criteria in conceptual exploration. Secondly, there is, in any case, a growing body of evidence on the effectiveness of inquiry-based learning.³ Indeed, not only are there large-scale studies that demonstrate significant learning gains for inquiry-based learning by comparison with traditional instruction, but at least one such study has found it to be "more effective (than

² See Paul A. Kirschner, John Sweller & Richard E. Clark, 'Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching,' *Educational Psychologist* (2006) 41:2, 75-86.

³ Cindy E. Hmelo-Silver, Ravit Golan Duncan, and Clark A. Chinn, 'Scaffolding and achievement in problem-based and inquiry learning: A response to Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark,' *Educational Psychologist* (2006) 42:2, 99-107.

traditional instruction) in increasing certain aspects of motivation and engagement, particularly among historically disadvantaged student groups.”⁴ This is a point to which we will return. Finally, it should be noted that the standardised achievement tests normally used as a basis of comparison fail to take account of many of the learning outcomes associated with inquiry-based learning, such as being a good questioner, becoming a self-directed problem-solver and a collaborative thinker, as well as the potential it can have for school retention rates. To take just the last point, improving school retention rates is an essential component of addressing educational disadvantage. Here I am reminded of an old BBC documentary *Socrates for Six Year Olds*, devoted to the work of Matthew Lipman, which featured a class of seriously educationally disadvantaged middle school students in Newark, New Jersey. Prior to the introduction of the Philosophy for Children program, no student in that class was expected to go on to high school. After a very difficult start, and perseverance on the part of the philosophy teacher, the class was turned around and all the students intended to continue with their education.

To my knowledge, there has been very little study of the effects of the Community of Inquiry on educational disadvantage, and nothing on disadvantage and the classroom as a Community of Inquiry in its broad sense. Still, it is worth beginning with what little there is. A study published in 2003 employed Community of Inquiry sessions in an attempt to improve literacy outcomes for disadvantaged students in a Catholic primary school in Goodna, on the outskirts of Brisbane.⁵ The school is located in a low socio-economic area with 30% of school’s student population coming from a non-English speaking background. The following table shows the distribution of the students in the study.

Year Level	Number of Students	ESL	Educationally Disadvantaged
1	63	13	18
2	58	20	12
3	75	17	24

The intervention involved an accredited teacher-educator in philosophy in schools taking classes from Year 1 to Year 3 for one hour a week for three or four weeks, observed by the classroom teacher and one other teacher from that year level. Prior to this, the teachers were provided with a brief in-service session where the Community of Inquiry process was explained, and during the sessions they were asked to note the participation and

⁴ See S. Lynch, J. Kuipers, C. Pyke & M. Szesze, ‘Examining the effects of a highly rated science curriculum unit on diverse students: Results from a planning grant.’ *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* (2005) 42, 921–946.

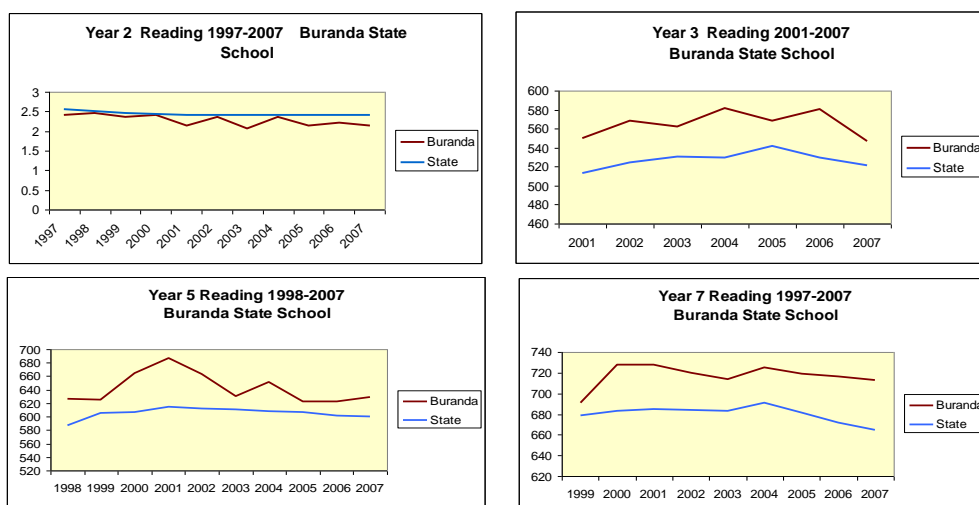
⁵ Cathy Douglass, ‘Including the disadvantaged: Literacy through philosophy—an innovative way of improving the literacy of disadvantaged students using an oral approach,’ *Critical and Creative Thinking* (2003) 11: 1, 54–64.

involvement of students using a checklist. In addition, the students kept reflection logs where they wrote or drew at the end of each session, in addition to answering a questionnaire at the end of the intervention. Teachers also completed a questionnaire on the impact and outcomes of the sessions on their classes, accompanied by follow-up interviews. Audio records of the sessions were made as well as some video recordings.

The results indicated the following: (1) Teachers reported that students spoke more confidently and there were improvements in expression. (2) Questioning skills were developed, including the development of open-ended questions among the older Year 3s. (3) There was better understanding of word meaning, including words like 'jealousy' and 'revenge' that were beyond the teachers' expectations. (4) Students became better able to express opinions and to support them with reasons. (5) Over half of the teachers noted improvements in critical listening. (6) Eight out of nine teachers observed that students had begun questioning texts for meaning. Many of these improvements were mentioned not only by the teachers, but also surfaced in the students' reflection logs and in their responses to the questionnaire. Comments such as 'I like philosophy because I learn to think good questions' and 'I think we should have philosophy because it gives us good reasons' or 'I have learned how to read better,' illustrate the point.

Although the methodology may not be flawless, the Goodna study provides us with reason to think that even a minimal intervention of this kind can pay dividends in the early years where educational disadvantage is associated with poor levels of literacy. Further evidence that the Community of Inquiry may help to address poor literacy levels in primary education comes from Buranda State School, about which no doubt Lynne Hinton will speak. Without wishing to steal Lynne's thunder, it is worth laying some data generated by state wide testing alongside the Goodna report.

Buranda State School: Reading Compared with the State



As you can see, Buranda students consistently begin at or below state norms, then rise above them and stay there. Given that Buranda committed itself to the Community of Inquiry, making it a central plank in the school's approach to teaching across all classes and all years, it is a reasonable hypothesis that it is in large measure responsible for the outcome that you see here.

The more general claim that Community of Inquiry style interventions can result in cognitive gains in the general school population was made in the Clackmannanshire study in Scotland carried out by Tricky and Topping.⁶ Their data come from a project in which 10-12 year-olds were immersed in a 16 month program of Philosophy for Children and tested against a control group that continued with their previous activities. There was a significant gain in the standardised age-related mean of the experimental group's Cognitive Ability Test (CAT) scores, but not in the control group and, remarkably, this shift was still present two years down the track with no further intervention.

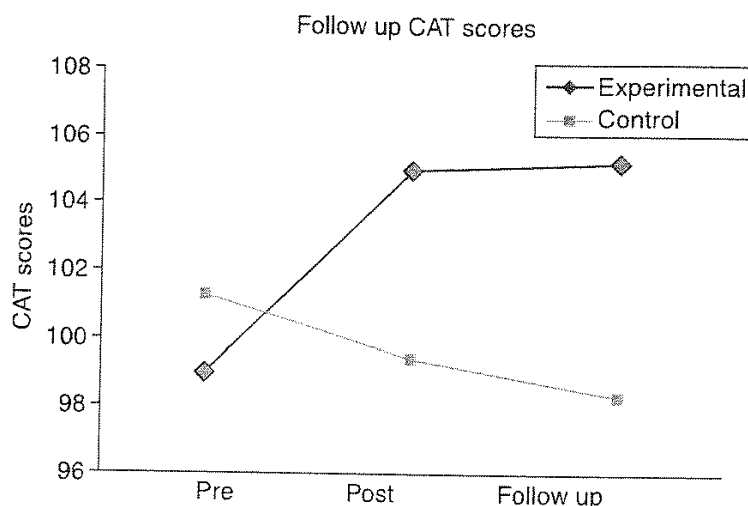


Figure 1. Mean cognitive ability test scores for all subjects in experimental and control groups at pre-test, post-test and follow-up.

This is consistent with the Buranda data, and provides further reason to suppose that the initial improvements noted at Goodna are likely to develop in ways that are robust and sustainable with continuing effort. It is worth noting that, of the three cases mentioned, only Buranda approaches the broader conception of the classroom as a Community of Inquiry mentioned in the Introduction. Encouraging as these results are, therefore, a great deal of study is needed to demonstrate the benefits of different levels of engagement with the Community of Inquiry, particularly when it comes to educational disadvantage.

⁶ K.L.Topping and S. Trickey, 'Collaborative philosophical inquiry for schoolchildren: Cognitive gains at 2-year year follow-up,' *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (2007) 77, 787-796.

While we need a great deal more in the way of published data, this does not prevent us from considering relevant features of the Community of Inquiry in the abstract. Such considerations may also give us reason to believe that it can be effective in dealing with educational disadvantage. In what follows, I will examine three key features of the Community of Inquiry and use them to argue that case.

The Community of Inquiry and Student Engagement

Student engagement is necessary for achieving educational outcomes in schools. Although, generally speaking, engagement is a matter of degree, we can speak of the disengaged student as one who has become detached from what the school has to offer and whose interactions with it may be characterised by indifference or resentment. It has been noted that disengagement “generally begins in the last two years of primary school and is aggravated by the transition to secondary school, but in disadvantaged schools, it happens earlier and can be almost intractable by the time students reach Year 7.”⁷ This highlights the importance of introducing strategies to deal with educational disadvantage while students are in primary school and well before the stage when disengagement becomes engrained.

Disengagement occurs when students cannot see the personal relevance of what is being taught, lose interest and redirect their energies. By contrast, as Thomson and Comber claim, “...engaged learning occurs when the lives, knowledges, interests, bodies and energies of young people are at the centre of the classroom and school”.⁸ The practical question is how to place the student at the centre of their education, so that their life-world, knowledge, ideas, experience and interests, are relevant to the learning process and active ingredients in it. There are, of course, many ways in which schools and teachers can attempt to construct such a student-centred learning environment. The quickest way to see how the Community of Inquiry achieves these things is simply to experience it yourself. So let us peek into a classroom where a session of this kind is underway. It is a Year 6 class in a Sydney public school where the Community of Inquiry has been progressively introduced across all classes as a regular session during the school week.

Aspects of this encounter are immediately obvious. The students are arranged in a circle, thus enabling a face-to-face encounter among them. While the teacher facilitates that encounter by making a variety of contributions, including suggestions of his own, he does not instruct the students as to what they should think about the topic under discussion. He helps them to explore it together. In doing so, the students draw upon their personal

⁷ Rosalyn Black, ‘Crossing the Bridge: Overcoming entrenched disadvantage through student-centred learning,’ p. 10. <http://www.fya.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/black2007crossingthebridge.pdf>

⁸ P. Thomson and B. Comber ‘Deficient “disadvantaged students” or media-savvy meaning makers? Engaging new metaphors for redesigning classrooms and pedagogies,’ *McGill Journal of Education* (2003) 38:2, 305-328.

experience and background knowledge. They express their own opinions and consider those offered by others. They treat their fellows with respect, even though, and perhaps especially when, they are critical of what others have to say. Looking around the class, you can see a high level of student engagement, even though only a handful of people have spoken. There is no lack of interest, let alone disruption, and the class shows every sign of concentration and serious commitment to its explorations. These are all signs of the formation of an inquiring classroom community.

To the extent that teachers create opportunities for students to think for themselves through inquiry-based learning coupled with building community through collaborative activity, they can expect such engagement. While there is value in doing so as a special session—as it were, on Fridays after lunch—it is far less likely to turn around the student who is in danger of disengagement than a balanced diet of inquiry-based and collaborative learning spread throughout the week.

The Community of Inquiry and Developing the Capacity to Think

The apathy or rejection that comes with disengagement is also a sign that the student has come to see what the school has to offer as an unwanted imposition. This is hardly to be wondered at given the size of the gap that many disadvantaged students face between their out-of-school world and that provided by the school. As we have just seen, the student-centred approach of the Community of Inquiry helps to strengthen engagement by making productive use of students' background knowledge, perspectives, interests, understandings and ideas. This is one way in which we can help to close the gap. The classroom community does not take these things at face value, however, but treats them as things to be looked into. Students who offer opinions, for example, can be asked to back them up with reasons or evidence. Students who begin discussing an issue soon discover gaps in their background knowledge—things they realise they will need to investigate in order to more fully address it. When the class comes up with a number of suggestions in response to a problem, it has cause to compare their relative strengths and weaknesses. And when students express different points of view on some matter, they are drawn into an exploration of the basis of their differences in order to obtain a wider field of vision or mutual understanding, if not a resolution. In sum, the Community of Inquiry places students' thoughts—their questions, suggestions, ideas, understandings, and so on—at the centre of the learning process. It does this not just to connect what happens in the classroom to what students think, but in order to develop their ability to think.

By coupling what students think with a Deweyan emphasis upon developing the ability to think,⁹ students learn to correct and improve what they think. So instead of a curriculum that appears to the student as so much alien subject matter to be learned, it becomes something that they learn to think about by learning to correct and improve their own thinking. In this way, students are not merely learning some subject matter, but learning how to learn. Instead of schooling being an unwanted and alien imposition, it starts from where they are and helps them to develop their own powers of thought.

The emphasis being placed upon how to think may be a corrective to a curriculum overloaded with information to be learned, but it is not meant to provide a recipe for ignorance. Clearly, there is a great deal of subject matter that students need to learn, and we would only be adding to the burden of disadvantaged students were we to neglect it. But students in danger of disengaging from school need to see that they require that knowledge base in order to make progress with problems, issues and ideas that matter to them. They need to see that they do not yet understand something, or require further information, in order to make progress with things that have already caught their interest. And rather than being flooded with information, in a world already awash with it, they need to know how to evaluate that information for the purposes at hand. Indeed, there are none as ignorant as those who cannot tell the difference between what we have good reason to believe and unsupported claims or opinion parading as fact.

Having said this, it must be admitted that the Community of Inquiry approach involves a trade-off. Paying attention to the thinking process leaves less time to convey information. But that's as it should be, provided a reasonable balance is struck. The point is nicely illustrated by going back to the data that I presented on literacy. If we can alter the mix that we provide in education so as to significantly lift literacy among disadvantaged students, need it matter that this is time taken away from conveying information? As Dewey long ago complained, without being connected to thought, such information becomes a "dead load" that simply weighs the student down. That is, until they finally decide to throw it off.

The Community of Inquiry and Belonging

Having focused upon how honouring and nurturing the students' thoughts and ideas in the Community of Inquiry helps to develop their powers of thought, let us shift our gaze to the community side of the Community of Inquiry. One way of summing up the attitude of disengaged students is that they feel alienated from school, that they no longer belong there. By contrast, the development of an inquiring classroom community brings with it a

⁹ Dewey was uncompromising on this score: "all which the school can or need do for pupils, so far as their *minds* are concerned . . . is to develop their ability to think." *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 152.

sense of belonging. Here we are not talking about a warm fuzzy glow. We can see what it implies by continuing the contrast. Disengaged students no longer care about the material the teacher is asking them to learn, whereas students who see themselves as members of an inquiring community own and value their subject matter. Disengaged students are likely to channel their energies into non-productive or even disruptive behaviour, whereas students who feel that they belong to an inquiring community are keen to participate in it. And whereas disengaged students can't wait for the bell to ring, students who are immersed in the Community of Inquiry often can be heard to continue their classroom discussions out in the playground.

The contrast may be all very well, but do we have reasons to suppose that disadvantaged students, and especially those who are in danger of disengagement from their education, are more likely to feel that they belong at school if the classroom operates as a Community of Inquiry? Yes, we do. Some of those reasons have already been given. If we think about educational disadvantage from the point of view that teachers can address—that is, in terms of a disconnection between the student's life-world outside of school and the expectations and values embedded in the school—then the Community of Inquiry provides a way of making those connections. It does that through its student-centred approach, in which learning begins from where the student is and not at some pre-ordained point set by the subject matter. The thoughts and understandings that students bring into the classroom are a starting point for inquiry and a source of collective experience with which to inform and question what is said. At the same time, by a reciprocal effect, the students' experience and understanding becomes informed and refashioned by what they discover through their inquiries—including the regular schoolwork that may be required to carry those inquiries out. This approach says to the student: 'This is about you. You belong.'

Further reasons come into view when we turn to the kinds of interpersonal relations and self- and other-regard that is developed through the classroom Community of Inquiry. I have in mind such things as the following:

- (1) *Cooperation*. Students learn to see themselves as members of a cooperative community. They learn to value each other's contributions and to refrain from dominating or excluding others. The bonds that develop in such a cooperative learning environment promote a sense of belonging.
- (2) *Open-mindedness and tolerance*. Students learn to keep an open mind about matters of opinion and become less likely to rush to judgment. They learn to tolerate their differences and to show respect for people with whom they disagree. This generates a level of acceptance that is particularly valuable for students who may otherwise feel that they are not valued or do not fit in.
- (3) *Care*. Students develop care for each other. By exploring their thoughts and ideas together, they establish relations of mutual care and concern. These relations affirm the student's place in the classroom.

- (4) *Self-esteem*. Students develop confidence and self-regard by having their ideas and other contributions treated with respect. By seeing that they are valued members of their community, their sense of belonging is enhanced.

As students learn to cooperate with one another, become less likely to pre-judge things and other people, become more tolerant of one another, develop care for each other and begin to realise their own self-worth, so they come to value their time together. They establish a community to which they truly belong.

Naturally, we cannot deliver such an outcome overnight. It requires us to transform the culture of the classroom. As I said earlier, such a strong sense of community is less likely to develop if the Community of Inquiry is present only in its narrow sense of a special session during the week. To the extent that the class comes to constitute a Community of Inquiry in the broad sense, however, the fellowship of which I am speaking is certain to flourish.

Students who see schools as places where they do not really belong, and can hardly wait for the opportunity to make their escape, have much to gain if there is a strong and inclusive sense of community in the classroom. When combined with the fact that their questions, suggestions, opinions, understandings and ideas are taken seriously—that what they think matters—students who might otherwise end up disengaging from their education are instead likely to be drawn to it. Such is the power of the Community of Inquiry to take the student on board. And as the evidence is beginning to show, the engagement that it engenders and the thinking processes it develops can be relied upon to deliver the goods.