

Article

# Teaching for Justice in a Contradictory World

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**Abstract:** School today is caught in the dilemma of being expected to educate young people so that they can be integrated into modern industrial society. Because of structural injustices in society, not all students have equal chances in this integration process. Education in school is also expected to impart proficiency in skills which go beyond the functional skills which a productive society needs. These softer skills can threaten the aims of modern society because they have the potential to question its underlying rationale. Young people learn these skills in their everyday lives with their peers outside of school. They form part of the cultural wealth which students bring with them to school. It is up to school to draw on this cultural wealth of students and to foster the various forms of cultural capital contained therein so that students learn not to be victims of a one-sided schooling which reproduces those injustices that pervade modern society by placing excess value on cultural assets which are favored by dominant groups in society.

**Keywords:** contradiction; self-determined agency; cultural practice; identity; empowerment; symbolic creativity; everyday tactics; cultural wealth; imaginative language; resistance; social order

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## 1. Introduction

“Something is rotten in the state of . . . ”

One has the feeling that this famous line from Shakespeare’s Hamlet could be applied to any state in the world today. The reports on financial, political and other scandals throughout the world which flood the media nearly every day give the impression that there is indeed something very wrong about the state of the present world. This is not the place to enumerate the countries, the institutions, the persons involved. Let it suffice to say that it is no wonder that countless young people turn their backs on those countries, institutions and persons which or who claim to be moral authorities. The young are quick to see the discrepancy between the moral claims held by leading authorities and the way these same authorities conduct their own affairs. The contradiction involved is named and is branded as unacceptable.

In this paper I want to take ambivalence and contradiction, which are fundamental characteristics of modern education, as the starting point of my reflection. It is an ambivalence in which a suggested equity in education is shown to fail the litmus test of social reality. Education has the task of facing up to this contradiction and of nevertheless striving to empower young people to control their own destinies. This task has to be addressed not only as a structural problem in educational theory but also as a moral issue in the classroom.

## 2. Contradictions in Educational Systems

A main achievement of Karl Marx was to have pointed out that contradiction is not just a matter of personal failure or shortcoming. He showed that it is an essential feature of capitalist society. He unmasked the (supposed) autonomy and equality on the part of those who by contract sell their labour to those who are in possession of the means of production. He could show this equality to be a relationship of abstract subjects when examined in the light of what the parties obtain for their

respective part of the contract. The labourer who sells his labour does not get the full value of the product in return for what his labour produces. A supposed equality conceals the real inequality which exists between the contracting parties.

In the twentieth century this fundamental contradiction came to be seen as not being just a fundamental characteristic of the relationship of the working class to the class of the owners of production, but also as being a characteristic of educational systems in modern societies [1] (pp. 28–30). School is confronted with a number of dilemmas. It is caught up in the dilemma between being assigned the function of qualifying young people for positions in industrial societies according to their abilities and of selecting the young for these positions on meritocratic grounds. It is not clear however which subject matter should be taught to meet the needs of a rapidly changing industrial world, and more important for the topic of this paper, it is clear that the meritocratic system inherent in the school systems of industrial societies is based on the assumption of equal chance for all students, a supposed equity which does not bear out with reality. Students' abilities are not by any means equal, not because of any inherent lack on the part of the pupils themselves but rather because of the vast differences which are to be found in the social environments in which they were born into and grow up in. These differences seem to be quite stubborn and many pupils leave school without managing to offset these initial disadvantages in the course of their school career. Because of this the selection function of school can also be a latent motor in the reproduction of the injustice of social inequality.

Surveys such as the Pisa tests show that there is a definite correlation between success at school and one's social background [2]. The dominant culture underlying school curricula favours those who are already equipped with what is considered to be the necessary cultural capital to be able to come to terms with it. Nevertheless such structural features of school education should not force a blind eye on the potential inherent in young peoples' ability to make self-determined choices in their endeavour to give their existence a meaningful shape in the face of the variety of contingencies which they are confronted with in their lives.

An important aspect of justice has to do with how much individuals are masters of their own place in this world. It has to do with the capacity of individuals to act in a self-determined way and education has the task of empowering people to be agents in this sense. This corresponds to some extent with an inherent need in modern industrial societies for schooling to go beyond the imparting of purely functional skills and qualifications. There is also a need for the development of the ability to be creative, to be cooperative in team-work, to have the ability to make critical judgement. But the ability to be critical could question for example the ethical quality of what a company produces. These more reflective qualifications have the potential therefore of running contrary to schools' function of just adapting pupils to the functional needs of industry. This means there is a fundamental conflict in modern school: its functional aim of integrating young people into modern industrial society is at odds with school's capacity to undermine this integrating function.

### **3. School and the Cultural Process of the Constitution of Identity**

Looking at this dilemma of schooling from the point of view of cultural practice can be a useful way of pinpointing what is at stake and it can also point towards an acceptable way of dealing with it.

As has already been said above one of the major goals of education is to empower young people as agents in the construction of their identities. Culture is a major factor in the constitution of the ability to develop one's own subjectivity and identity. Culture here means the way individuals or groups of people handle the raw material of their social and material existence in order to develop their own specific ways of life with their own distinct forms of expression as a network of meaning. Subjectivity and successful identity are the result of having been enabled and empowered to pursue one's own meaning in life in a process of constant exchange with others who are also endeavouring to build a meaningful existence for themselves. School is an important area of cultural practice where this pursuit should take place. The question is how does cultural practice at school fit in with the twofold function of school mentioned above: its function of integrating young people into modern industrial society and

school's subversive potential which has the capacity of running contrary to its integrating function? Does school help enable and empower young people to develop their own authentic meaning in life which should also entail becoming aware of one's social reality and of adopting a critical attitude towards existing structures in society? Or is it more inclined to further the development of those qualifications which are more in line with that which an industrial society deems to be desirable and even necessary for its own survival and growth?

Cultural Studies in the Birmingham tradition has contributed a tremendous amount to the empirical investigation of how individuals constitute their identity through the meaningful handling of what is available to them in their everyday lives. The raw material for this handling is found in the social and material relationships of everyday experience. Young people find this material, for example, where it is displayed and offered for sale in the shopping malls they frequent. In shopping with their peers young people experiment with their identity. In the choice of the clothing they buy they work on the composition of their identities in exchange with their peers. This acting in a self-determined way generates meaning and it takes place within the social contacts they share with their peers. The public exchange with their peers is important because what is subjectively meaningful is meaningful in an intersubjective sense when it is recognised as such by one's peers. In the process of this public exchange the individual negotiation of what is meaningful becomes visible, it becomes a life-style. Because no big narrative exists any longer which could lay down a standard for what is considered to be meaningful, young people have to rely on their own capacities for coping with the contingencies which they are confronted with. With their peers they have to develop a capacity for framing their lives in a meaningful way. This self-determined agency entails a radical fragmentation and contextualisation of meaning. It becomes increasingly contradictory and complex. Culture in this sense is not static, nor is it uniform. It is an all-embracing whole which includes cultural texts, experiences and social practices. It is a dimension of social reality which as common culture is embedded in everyday life.

Central to this idea of culture is that it is mediated and influenced by the economic and social structures in which it takes place. It can confirm relationships of difference and of inequality but it also has the potential of being able to shift these relationships and make them more flexible. An adequate analysis of culture sees it as an aggregate of practices that can be carried out within a framework of power and of impotence in everyday life.

But in what way do social practices of power influence the formation of identity? Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony [3] shows how cultural practice is substantially related to relationships of power and impotence. His concept of cultural hegemony offers an important theoretical framework for understanding how the dominant culture in educational systems such as schools works. He describes how groups in society gain and maintain their supremacy by virtue of subtle strategies of consent and not by open forms of pressure. Supremacy groups use their concepts and cognitive structures to understand and explain the world around them. Their understanding of the world becomes then the 'natural' and the only legitimate one. It becomes the dominant culture of school, permeating the curricula, the expectations of the teachers and the leaving-certificate examinations. The aim of the dominant culture of these supremacy groups is to integrate the cultures, the way of thinking and the experiences of inferior groups into their way of constructing the world. This induces inferior groups to interpret their own world and their own experiences in a manner that is predetermined by the dominant culture. Because they are not in possession of an adequate amount of cultural capital to be able to deal with the resources they are confronted with at school they fail in comparison with those peers who are more acquainted with and have adopted the parameters of the dominant culture. This can lead the disadvantaged to losing their self-esteem and to them finding it extremely difficult to make a success of their school career.

Despite the cultural predominance of supremacy groups there will always be some people who will question the hegemonic claim of the advantaged in their supposedly natural understanding of social reality. Although not being recognised as being on a par with the dominant culture of the supremacy groups the disadvantaged in society develop their own forms of cultural practice which

give expression to their understanding of the world. This way cultural practice becomes an area where social differences (class, gender, ethnical origin, etc.) and their understanding of the world are constituted and confirmed, or negated. Culture becomes an area where conflicting ideas about meaning confront each other and this means conflicts surrounding cultural hegemony.

Those young people who do not conform to the dominant culture have access to spaces other than school in their everyday lives where they can bring their creativity to bear on the construction of their identities. Paul Willis has analysed the everyday aesthetics of 'common culture' which young people develop in their confrontation with the commodities which the consumer industry offers [4]. It is often thought that young people are completely at the mercy of the profit interests and marketing strategies of the big brands. A closer look at the capitalist market however shows that profit interests and successful sales are just one side of the market. The active symbolic acquisition of consumer goods is the other side. Goods on sale lay out new fields of semiotic possibilities which young people appropriate for the purpose of positioning themselves culture-wise and with which they can construct their own expressive identities. They choose that which serves the representation and interpretation of their world, irrespective of the interests of the capitalist consumer industry. Willis called this 'symbolic creativity'. In the active acquisition of consumer commodities a process of acculturation takes place in which the consumer in an interaction with his peers constructs a new form of expressive subjectivity. This process does not change the social status of the individual but it does extend the range of his ability to act, of his agency. The important point about this symbolic creativity is that it is something carried out by the persons themselves on their own initiative in a space chosen by themselves. It is an important step in building up self-confidence and in taking control over their own lives.

This symbolic activity, which would be called 'tactics' by Michel de Certeau, is to be seen as standing in opposition to the 'strategies' or interests of established institutions [5]. Disadvantaged groups in society who have to come to terms somehow or other with the social and political powers of this world manage to carve out areas for themselves where they develop subtle tactics in their everyday practices as silent and creative forms of resistance against the imposed order. This resistance is not articulated in any discursive way. It is implicit in everyday practices. It takes place in the way the given is creatively appropriated by the individual. The established order is not radically changed by these everyday tactics but these are enhanced as imaginative forces which capitalist consumerism cannot stifle. There is a tricky tension between that which is given, which is imposed by the predominant order of things and that which is made possible in the creative tactics of everyday social practices. The creativity in the agency involved in everyday tactics has the potential to unwittingly initiate changes in the social order, changes which will not be immediately noticed but which as a whole do contribute to a more just society.

In a similar vein, John Fiske in his analysis of the reception of films and television series has shown that people who live under inferior conditions use the resources provided by the cultural industry in a way which does not correspond to the intentions of the producers [6] (pp. 63 and 80). Their reception of resources takes place on the basis of their social experiences. Texts (all forms of popular culture are considered to be texts) have a semantic surplus of meaning (polysemy) which lies beyond the control of their accepted and dominant interpretation. This surplus allows the recipient to interpret the text in a way not intended by the producer. The reception and interpretation of a text is participatory culture. It is a form of resistance, a term which Fiske uses to refer to "the refusal to accept the social identity proposed by the dominant ideology and the social control that goes with it" [6] (p. 241). Participatory culture becomes a place of social contention about the production, about the maintenance and about the attainment of symbolic power.

Increasingly awareness is growing that the construction and the shaping of life in a meaningful way is a cultural process carried out by active individuals who are contextualised in society. School is part of this cultural process. The aim of the analysis of this process in everyday practices wants to call attention to perspectives and possibilities of intervening in the struggle for a just and democratic transformation of society. The aim is not just to carry out research on how relationships of power

in society are constituted in and through culture. It is also to point out and help people augment possibilities of self-determined agency in their lives so that they can learn to see the societal context of their concrete situation in life, to recognise possibilities of change and to grasp them when possible. An analysis of the relationships of power and difference in everyday cultural practices has the aim of identifying possibilities where self-determined agency can be broadened with a change to a more just and better world in mind. That entails on the one hand analysing how power relationships infiltrate people's everyday lives and how they can limit a person's prospects of leading a dignified existence. On the other hand it means highlighting individual possibilities of active participation in society. This does not mean that the outcome, a society which might be a little more just, can be guaranteed as a purposeful result of this participation. Augmented self-determined agency is in itself however a form of social change towards more justice in society.

School has a responsibility in contributing towards the augmentation of self-agency and in that way can also make its contribution to the achievement of more justice. In order to meet this responsibility it is important that education theory and pedagogy understand school, teaching and learning as cultural processes where agency can be knowingly cultivated. The reflections above show that young people do indeed avail of spaces where self-agency can be practised. It is up to school to make sure that its cultural work does not fall behind in its share of the task of promoting the ability to actively participate in shaping a just society.

#### 4. Teachers as Cultural Workers

The path towards social equity in education is not just a matter of a critical reflection on youth and its ability to explore creative options in attaining some form of control over their own lives. It also means that teachers need to reflect on the rationale underlying the way they conduct their profession so that they can be better facilitators in helping students become more aware of their social reality and learn to discover their own creative potential in defining their aspirations in the face of the challenges which they are confronted with in this contradictory world.

Henry Giroux advocates the importance of teachers being critical thinkers and not just supposedly neutral performers of what is considered to be effective teaching [7]. A teacher is not just an expert in imparting practical skills. Very often management issues, efficiency and imparting functional skills seem to dominate the idea of what is deemed to be the proper way teachers should work. Contrary to being just neutral performers teachers play an important role in the creation and validation of political, economic and social interests through the educational rationale underlying their everyday task. Teaching should be considered to be a demanding task in which the teacher is actively involved in producing teaching and learning materials and in creating learning situations which fit the cultural and social contexts in which they teach, which promote responsible agency on the part of the students with a view to them becoming active citizens in a democratic and just society. The intellectual task which this entails involves taking an active responsibility in asking fundamental questions about what they actually teach, and especially about the broader aims which they wish to achieve, about their role in developing a democratic and just society. These questions touch on issues about school as a space where cultural work takes place. The teacher should reflect on this cultural work as being tied to matters of power relationships underlying the cultural artefacts which he uses as teaching and learning resources. It is important that that the teacher asks: in what way can the resources he or she is using in the classroom help students to voice their own views and feelings about what is being taught? To put it in terms borrowed from Tara J. Yosso's notion of 'cultural wealth' (a critical expansion of Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital') [8] (pp. 77–81), but in a different key [9]: which resources can a teacher use to help students express and develop their aspirational capital ('the ability to hold on to hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality'), their linguistic capital ('the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style'), their familial capital ('refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition'), their social

capital ('networks of people and community resources . . . ' which 'can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions'), their navigational capital ('refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions'), and their resistant capital ('refers those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality')? The following section will delineate a number of classroom possibilities with a view to fostering and nurturing these various forms of cultural wealth.

## 5. The Classroom: Justice as a Moral Issue in Religious Education

Religious education in a school setting [10] is confronted with the conflicting expectations and settings which characterise modern educational systems. On its own it cannot change these expectations and settings but it can foster the creative and empowering element of education by giving students the opportunity of voicing their own experiences and visions of what is just and unjust ('aspirational' and 'linguistic' capital). Young people have their own ideas on justice. These have been examined at length in the course of various projects emanating from the 'elementarisation' approach which was initially developed at the University of Tübingen in Germany under the direction of K. E. Nipkow and F. Schweitzer. We are indebted to Nipkow [11] (pp. 27–63) for the following sections on justice as a moral issue in teaching and learning.

In a project which analysed lessons in religious education on God, justice and parables one focus was on the creativity of young people in these areas in a classroom setting. Biblical stories are a good starting point to find out what kind of ideas young people have in mind when they are confronted with situations which touch upon the idea of justice. The parable (Matthew 18: 25–35) about the slave who owes his master a huge sum of money and whose debt is cancelled by his master but who he himself is not willing to cancel the debt of a fellow-slave and whom he has thrown into prison provides a good platform for confronting the pupils with a biblical answer to issues of justice surrounding the problem of debt and their own solutions to this problem, a problem which is still virulent today.

In a religious education lesson which was analysed in detail one of the pupils stood out among the others in pleading for a merciful act of forgiveness which would discontinue the spiral chain of never-ending debt. This pupil seems to have grasped the idea that only a different kind of justice and forgiveness is able to come to terms with the unrelenting chain of debt. A merciful act of annulment, carried out without setting any conditions, is the only way to overcome the very human wish to see that the debt be paid back. This creative insight of one of the pupils should have been a key moment in this lesson. The rest of the class could have been invited to bring their creative imagination to bear on this view. It would have been interesting to see how solutions offered by other pupils would have compared with the life-preserving quality of this pupil's vision. This vision is close to the biblical idea of God's will which wants to sustain and replenish life and not destroy it. The analysis of the lesson showed however that the teacher was at a loss and did not know how to deal with the interesting cue given by that pupil. Instead he was more intent on making sure that the lesson plan he had prepared was carried through. In the training of teachers there is a need to train them in developing a sensitivity for those teaching and learning situations in the class-room which enkindle and foster students' creative and responsible agency and critical vision, which are favourable to the promotion of the students' cultural wealth. Being versatile in the grammar of possibility should be a major asset in a teacher's professional repertoire so that he can create, recognise and foster situations in the class-room where students' creative imagination can be encouraged and cultivated. Teachers should realise that a major characteristic of sustainable justice is the empowering of the young in giving expression to what they believe to be possible even though the possibilities envisaged might not be current practice in the world they live in. Giving voice to what is possible does not change society immediately. It will not eradicate the contradictions which envelop society. But it can envisage the hope that a change might come to pass.

### 5.1. Learning to Voice One's Feelings about Justice ('Linguistic' Capital)

As well as using such narratives from the gospels it is also advisable to look to the psalms and to the prophets in the search for materials which are suitable for fostering a mature attitude towards the issues of justice which plague contemporary societies. Since the psalms give voice to many existential themes, such as joy and praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, despair, etc., they can be a wonderful platform for helping pupils find a language with which they can experiment in expressing what they feel when confronted with similar situations. The language of the psalms is very direct and explicit. It comes from the heart and because of that it is very appropriate to use it not only in liturgical but also in educational settings. Underlying the feelings expressed in the psalms are fundamental existential experiences which transcend time and more often than not they express feelings which are to be found in all age-groups. These feelings include that of loneliness, of dejection and anger because of glaring injustice, of revenge, the feeling that God alone can restore justice, feelings of wanting to blame God for not intervening and finally feelings of gratitude and praise of God's justice. Despite all setbacks a feeling of confidence in God permeates throughout. With regard to the theme of justice there are ample complaints about unfair judgements and the yearning for protection and liberation from hardship as a result of the unfair distribution of goods to be found in the psalms (e.g., Psalm 82, 2: complaints about partiality in judgement and Psalm 72, 4: call for liberation from hardship). A longing for a just and peaceful world is a key feature to be found in this biblical songbook (Psalm 72, 7; Psalm 85, 10). Here one can see that the individual longing for justice in this world goes beyond the particular sphere of one's own personal well-being. It envisions a just world for all. It has the common good in mind.

There have been various well documented attempts at making children familiar with the language of the bible. Those which are of most interest to us here are those which use the psalms especially to help young people especially to express their existential feelings about their own lives and about the world in general. It is not always accepted that young people, even children at primary school age, have definite feelings and views about basic human situations but more often than not they do not have the language at hand to be able to express what they feel and what they think. Adults, because of experiences which they have already had in their lives, can usually handle existential situations of fear, of distress, of loneliness in a more controlled and rational manner than children. Of course that is not always the case. Very often adults are at a loss when they are confronted with fundamental existential situations. That is why it is important to introduce children to a form of language with which they can learn to cope with their existential experiences. Some of these experiences can be very disturbing; some can be very moving in a beautiful way. To learn to give expression to what one feels can be an important step on the road to becoming a responsible and mature adult. The bible has a wealth of texts which give expression to the full gamut of human feelings. Biblical language when properly prepared can easily be adapted to all age groups.

In Germany, Ingo Baldermann [12] and Rainer Oberthür [13] have done pioneering work in producing resources based on the psalms and have also documented their work and the children's imaginative adaptations. The texts selected in these resources reflect young people's interest in imaginative language: they concentrate on those texts which are very poetical, emotional and which are full of imagery. Imagery is all-important here. Imagery has the function of being able to express longings of the heart in visions which cannot necessarily be put into practice but which are a legitimate way of way of expressing one's wishes to see a different, more just world come into existence. Psalm 23, beginning with "The Lord is my shepherd" is a wonderful example of an imagery which portrays the desire to lead a safe life in the presence of a just God who will not let the injustice in the world overcome.

The directness and imagery of the chosen biblical texts give the pupils the chance of being able to identify themselves with the feelings expressed in them whilst at the same time not having to address their own private experiences directly. This open but nevertheless protected space in the guise of the biblical text is an important aspect of this way of dealing with such intimate existential situations without having to necessarily disclose one's own private feelings and emotions. The directness and imagery of the psalms can be used as a platform in helping children formulate their own short texts

and develop their own creative images about what kind of a world they would like to live in. It is up to the teacher to provide the proper resources which can stimulate the children's imaginative linguistic and aspirational capital in their appeal for a just world for everyone.

### *5.2. Learning to Protest in the Name of the Common Good ('Resistant' and 'Familial/Communal' Capital)*

Whilst the psalms are an invaluable resource for learning to voice individual feelings of sorrow and fear and also for giving expression to one's hopes, the prophets are more suitable at a secondary school age for developing an active potential of political resistance in the face of the injustice which abounds in our world today. The prophetic tradition to be found in the bible (for example, Amos) does not shrink from naming those who are responsible for the injustice to be found in their midst. The prophets did not fear the mighty of their time nor did they flinch at getting involved in international politics. The political relevance of the prophets, especially in regard to issues of justice, is quite outstanding. Religious education has a responsibility in bringing this prophetic tradition to bear in the fostering of resistant capital in young people.

On the basis of the prophetic tradition religious education can do its share in developing an ability among the young to raise one's voice in naming injustice and it can stimulate them in the search of the common good. The nurturing of familial capital goes well beyond a narrow understanding of kinship. It includes a consciousness of and commitment to the well-being of community. For this reason it is necessary to expand the concept of 'familial' capital with the idea of 'communal' capital. With "communal capital" it is the well-being of the peers of the young which is intended. Young people are quite aware of what is good for them and for their immediate peers. This needs to be expanded to include their peers at large too. For example when they go shopping they know what is good for themselves and for their friends but more often than not they do not take the well-being of those who produce the goods they consume into account. This dichotomy can be raised in the classroom by drawing on their own sense of justice with regard to themselves and by expanding it to include the well-being of those involved in the production of goods. In the prophetic biblical tradition this good life is something which goes beyond an awareness of the well-being of one's own kin. It also envisages just relations in the larger community and in one's dealings with other nations. As well as that it goes beyond philanthropy. It is more than being generous with one's wealth in an effort to alleviate the needs of the poor. This is not to be belittled, but the biblical notion of justice for all is embedded in 'shalom', a universal and all-inclusive peace with God the Lord of life as its guarantor.

### *5.3. Learning to Deal with Unjust Practice in Christian History*

Injustice is not just something which takes place in society at large. It is also part and parcel of Christian history. This must also be addressed in religious education. With older pupils it could be rewarding to have a closer look at this aspect of Christianity through the lens of a less conventional teaching resource which in a very subtle way portrays the contradiction which is to be found between the yearning for justice in the biblical tradition and the way this yearning has been handed down in the course of Christian history.

A famous painting by the Italian painter Caravaggio can be a very useful resource for the classroom in this regard because despite its seemingly apparent theme a closer examination of the painting reveals that Caravaggio was also alluding to a financial scandal, an embezzlement, in which the honoured deceased patron was involved. Such a historically remote resource can be an invaluable help in raising the question of how much does contradiction and ambivalence with regard to justice belong to the Christian tradition?

In the year 1600 Caravaggio was asked to paint a big picture on the theme of the calling of St. Matthew for a chapel dedicated to a deceased patron in Rome [14]. This was Caravaggio's first public commission. This painting is often referred to in religious education lessons to initiate a discussion on what being a follower of Jesus entails. The painting hangs in a side-chapel in the French national church S. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome. Innumerable visitors go to the church each day to

admire this masterpiece. At first sight the subject of the painting seems to be very straightforward. The composition is quite clear. To the left in the picture a man is sitting at a table with other men and is apparently counting money. To his left two of the young men who are at the table with him look up seemingly astonished at two people, Jesus and Peter, who are approaching the table.

Jesus is standing in the right hand half of the picture with Peter standing in front of him with his back turned to the observer. A ray of light coming diagonally from the right above the head of Jesus lightens up the area portrayed. Jesus' stretched out his right arm with his index finger pointing towards the group at the table dominates the picture. It was a stroke of genius on the part of Caravaggio to have been able to reduce the story of the calling of St. Matthew to this simple gesture. Here Caravaggio quotes the fresco portraying the creation of Adam which Michelangelo had created a hundred years previously on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Jesus' hand quotes the hand of Adam (not that of the creator) as a reference to his being the new Adam who summons to a new life with him.

What is surprising in this painting is the ambiguity intended by Caravaggio as a form of protest at the scandals he observed in everyday Roman life. When one looks more carefully at the person sitting at the table opposite the viewer one can see that he repeats the pointing gesture of Jesus and points to . . . himself? Or does he point to the man to his right who seems to be putting some money aside for himself? Caravaggio probably knew that Cardinal Matthieu Cointrel had abused his office at the papal court by lining his own pockets. With the evident ambiguity in Jesus' call to follow him Caravaggio might well have had people like the dead and buried patron, Cardinal Cointrel, in mind, people who by enriching themselves abused their position instead of working for the common good. Such ambiguous works are a godsend for religious education because of their ability to retain the attention of the students. Questions could arise here about the proper way to point to public scandals. Is it more appropriate to be direct about them and to name them in no uncertain terms? Or is it better to be more discreet? Who was Caravaggio anyway to think he had the right to refer to such scandals? His own life-style was not without rebuke! There is ample room here for discovering more about Caravaggio, about his ambitions to be raised to the nobility, about his having to flee Rome because of having killed a man in a feud, etc.

There is another injustice surrounding the setting of the painting. During his life-time Cointrel had acquired the right to be buried in this chapel and to have it decorated as he deemed fit. That was usual practice for the nobility and for the better off in Rome during this period. Being buried like this served to legitimate and maintain ecclesiastical power and the status quo in Roman society. A visit to the chapel on the part of the less well-endowed made them aware of their marginalised position in Rome. They had no hope of every being buried in such noble surroundings.

Another detail in the painting deserves to be mentioned in the context of this paper. It raises the question of the attitude of the better well-off towards those who are less fortunate. In the context of this painting by Caravaggio it is a question about the relationship of the rich to the poor in the seventeenth century but it is an issue which is still virulent today when the gap between the rich and the poor is getting wider and wider as time goes on.

The detail in question is that Jesus and Peter are portrayed barefoot. This is significant because with it Caravaggio wanted to allude to a special quality of being a disciple of Jesus. He wanted to emphasise the qualities of humility, of not possessing anything and of always being on the move (Peter is carrying a staff). We know that Caravaggio was closely associated with what is known as a pauperist way of thinking which then existed in Rome [15]. The wealthy who were attracted to this way of thinking felt that they should do something to alleviate the lot of those (humble) poor who deserved their alms but, and this is important, they did not feel that the social order should be changed in any way. There was no question of the wealthy relinquishing any of their social privileges or status to take sides with the poor. Is Caravaggio's painting a subtle critique of the inconsistency of the pauperist movement's attitude towards the poor? This question is still virulent today. People throughout the world contribute a lot to relief organisations to help the less fortunate. Do these people want a change in the social order so that the poverty induced through injustice be one day eradicated forever?

Maybe they think that the social order cannot be changed and they just want to ease their conscience? Maybe they feel nothing can be changed. Who knows? In any case it is certainly an issue which is worth raising in the classroom so that students become aware of the various ramifications involved in activities designed to help the disadvantaged and to abate injustice.

## 6. Conclusions

School is a contradictory space which often fails to offset the unjust social realities which beset the educational task of empowering young people to make their contribution towards a more just society. Some of the mechanisms which are at the root of these inequities have been brought to mind. This article has emphasised and valorised those creative capacities which young people have at their disposition in their struggle to come to terms with the contradictions which surround them. Teaching and learning are understood to be cultural activities which promote the cultural wealth of the young with a view to augmenting their self-agency in shaping a more just world for themselves and for the society they live in.

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## References and Notes

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9. The example of ‘symbolic activity’ as outlined by Paul Willis (see above) shows that young people possess a form of cultural wealth which is not usually appreciated and valued by adults, especially in a school setting. They are not necessarily oppressed in the same sense as people who come from marginalised backgrounds are, but their resources are usually seen not to be on an educational par with adult resources.
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