In a bright new century bent on releasing markets from the shackles that have hitherto prevented them from delivering bright new centuries, schools are set to become traders in Information Communications Technology (ICT) skills, dealers in multiple intelligences, retailers of social mobility, vendors of social and economic advantage and, at no extra cost, designers of personal marketability. Schools are set to be banded and branded as good or bad producers of techno-wise citizens.

Is this the sort of bright newness we want? Do we really want a system more interested in costs, benefits, and productivity outcomes than in developing the human potential and creativity needed to solve the problems that our current way of life manages to proliferate at such an alarming rate?

If we want schooling to encourage young people to care, then current ‘reforms’ must do more than tailor education to meet the needs of the national/global economy and to fashion techno-wise, producer/consumers. If we want education to make a difference, then we have to figure out how it might: stimulate our ability to imagine social alternatives; demonstrate that ‘now’ is only one of many other ways of being in the world; prompt greater dissatisfaction with our recently commodified existence; offer alternatives which build on differences; show that accepted commonplaces of ‘human nature’ can be re-designed to make cooperation as appealing as rivalry or apathy; and nurture care and concern about social inequality.

Not Quite Revolutions

Feminism and the struggle for female emancipation have taught us that, just because things have always been a particular way, it does not stand to reason that they always have to stay that way. The accomplishments of this almost, but not quite, revolution-from-within are profound, and yet its bloodless, radical change has for many, become taken for granted (O’Brien 1989).

Jean Jacques Rousseau’s ‘radical’ ideas about the education of women did not stop him from becoming the intellectual superstar of the French Revolution and an emblem of human liberty and freedom.

Two centuries on, and still it seems that Western education systems manage to sustain ardent commitment to ideas that imply revolutionary change, but in actuality prop up the status quo. Still...
it seems that notions of universal freedom, liberty, and equality sustain ideas and practices that accomplish precisely the reverse.

The gains made for women are revolutionary, but they are also limited; they are not the best we can hope for, and neither are they irreversible. Achievements have not been pulled off by education alone, but neither have they occurred in spite of education. Revolutions are not quite so straightforward as we would perhaps like them to be.

Causes and consequences can rarely be marked down as entirely this or that. People of the past did not wallow in contradictions and hypocrisies that we are now able to transcend and put to rights. Take for example, media representations of femininity. Most of us are savvy to media hype and the exploitation of sex, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity in advertisements, movies, magazines, pornography and so on. While we may not like a great many of these representations, we find sex, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity fascinating to the extent that few of us would advocate censorship. If we see this simply as a dilemma of representation, then all we have to do is represent things differently; all we have to do is to provide positive images and replace stereotypes. But representation strategies fall short of offering a final solution to the attractions and contradictions of these sex-commodified disparities.

I want to argue that education can make a difference at a micro and macro level, but its effects are often unpredictable. For instance, my working-class background neither secured the replication of class disadvantage nor compounded it with overlaying sex and race based inequalities. The against-the-odds success I eventually attained does not indicate that the system is meritocratic, but that its outcomes are not invariably fixed in, for example, class, gender or ethnicity. In my case, the absence of extended family, and the presence of racial and sexual antagonism, made academic success a necessity.

Fresh Fields Secondary Modern School did little to broaden my educational opportunities or those of the young people I grew up with. My carefully cultivated domestic science and needlecraft skills are now all but redundant, but an unexpected bonus came of my stave-off-boredom reading efforts, selected for escapist and existential titles like The Dispossessed, The Outsiders, Great Expectations and She. In the absence of careers advice at a school that customarily produced hosiery workers, department store employees, and housewives, I realised that my chances of becoming an explorer or scientist were pretty remote. Although a working-class teacher of colour also seemed entirely improbable, Mrs Berwick, my inspiring science mistress, was a credible role model.

**Poverty**

According to a recent study people are more concerned about the growing gap between the rich and poor than poverty (Brotherhood of Saint Lawrence, 1999). Why are people more perturbed by the growing poverty gap than pauperisation? Perhaps it is easier to deal with the unfairness of growing disparities, than to deal with the root of the problem.

Poverty is a condition of wealth and privilege. While we may not be personally responsible for the dire facts and acts of the world, we can certainly be their beneficiary, and thus cannot escape complicity and advantage. Poverty is a process of impoverishment; not a force of nature but a force of human society. It is a course of action; not a thing – despite the fact that the very language we use to speak about it conspires to convince us otherwise. On the one hand, it is associated with ideas about inherent inferiority, deficiency, worthlessness and inadequacy often associated with those who can most clearly be distinguished as ‘not like us’. On the other hand, it is linked to notions of chance, inevitability, bad luck and misfortune or the effect personal weakness, failing, careless extravagance and reckless spending. Poverty is not just a social, economic and political thing, but a term of reference that manages propagate contradictory meanings, and to evade its own implications.

Teaching about material conditions and circumstances do not automatically offer productive solutions. First, because we tend to divide knowledge into subject disciplines that make it difficult to raise useful or important questions, and devise alternative courses of action. Modern subject specialisations and technical languages are an historical product of science’s classificatory obsession and legitimate
some knowledges and questions, while outlawing others. Thus for example, it is possible to study Rousseau in philosophy, the French Revolution in history, sex differences in biology, sex inequality in social studies, and gender representations in English, as if the issues raised by these topics, do not overflow into one another.

Second, loading up young people with facts and information can submerge them in doom and gloom details that trigger despair, guilt, frustration, disconnection and outright rejection. When faced with overwhelmingly complex and detailed information my fiercely egalitarian 12 year-old daughter pointedly declares: ‘a little more information than I need to know!’ while my 15 year-old son simply says ‘I don’t want to know’. How do we deal with the tendency to look the other way or seek refuge in infotainment and other technological distractions? How do we deal with the allure of screen technologies?

Accounts of poverty, victims and minorities are necessary to make known a situation, recruit converts and provoke passion, but they also risk reinforcing disempowering notions of victim-hood, passivity, weakness (Jameson 2000). The provision of inspiring stories of heroic resistance to injustice and oppression offers an alternative approach that affirms a cultural group’s strength and offers the possibility of life-sustaining alternatives, but may downplay the structural circumstances of oppression. Perhaps, as Jameson suggests, our strategies need to ‘correspond to different historical moments in the struggle, and evolving local opportunities and representational needs’, and it may be that we need to undertake many different approaches at the same time.

**Education and Inequality**

It is helpful to consider the various ways that education research and theory have traditionally approached questions of social inequality. For the most part, its concerns focus on Western industrial contexts and questions of social mobility or skill-based training. Less attention has been paid to minding the gaps and contradictions in education which might enable us to develop alternative institutional structures, pedagogies, or curricula. Discussions often attend to instrumental, intrinsic, and production functions where education:

- transmits knowledge and culture from generation to generation
- socialises and prepares competent citizens and productive workers
- facilitates social mobility and higher income
- produces new knowledge
- informs and enlightens.

Confidence in the ability of education to contribute to social stability and national community was briefly interrupted in the 1970s. The ‘new sociology of education’ highlighted the way that schools worked to replicate the status quo, class-based inequality and capitalist social relations. Schools were seen to reproduce class structures of inequality by inducting different behaviours, values, and attitudes in different classes of students. Schools developed different ‘types of personal demeanour, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications’ (Bowles & Gintis 1976, 131). Marxist theorists challenged the taken-for-granted idea that education was meritocratic, promoted social mobility, and served everyone’s interests arguing that such beliefs encourage us to tolerate inequality, and obscure the fact that employment and material and cultural rewards are frequently distributed on basis of class, not distributed on grounds of ability and hard work.

According to Bowles & Gintis, different schools train different classes of people for different categories of work and the various hierarchies and practices of schooling corresponded to class divisions of labour in industry. Working-class schools are authoritarian and stratified because compliancy skills are necessary for industry workers. ‘Elite’ schools are experiential, student centred and progressive because critical, innovative, cooperative problem solving skills are necessary for industry leaders. Unfortunately, the effort to imitate ‘elite’ schools, like all school reform, is inevitably coopted to the overall project of capitalism giving the impression of pro-active change while leaving the systematic contingencies of capitalist social relations intact.

Seminal school ethnographies by Willis (1978) and McRobbie (1978) challenged the idea that schools were agents of social reproduction by emphasising the means by which working-class boys and girls resist education. Problematically their resistance to schooling means that they ‘learn to lose’, as well as ‘to labour’ in working-class occupations. Although education is connected to other elements of society, the relationship between social mobility and capitalist social relations are not so straightforward that we can assume that teaching working-class students to win necessarily means the destruction of capitalism itself. Education cannot guarantee personal success and failure, and it is not of itself able to rectify the wrongs of the world. Feminists have pointedly noted that the destruction of hierarchical class relations will not automatically do away with sexual inequality and the oppression of women. Indeed, it may simply result in the formation of new sorts of divisions and inequalities.
Reinvented Social Relations

Since the 1980s talk of oppression, social justice and inequality has given way to a neo-liberal language of ‘reform’ that have hauled education into a vortex of capitalist social relations that are not so much ‘reproductive’ as ‘restless, complex, and profoundly re-invented’ (Lankshear 1997: 309). Decentralisation is the rhetorical ‘reform’ centrepiece of twenty-first century education (Kamat 2000) and it proliferates ‘reforms’ that end up speaking in a global capitalist monotone. Such ‘reform’ does not mean change for the better, but change for better profits, decentralisation does not lead to greater democracy but instead to greater standardisation, control, and re-centralisation.

The rationale of decentralised reform parodies Darwinism in a devilishly simple form of Orwellian double-speak which goes as follows:

a) today’s ruthlessly competitive global environment means we have to produce or be out-produced, consume or be out-consumed
b) survival is competition and competition is survival
c) competition automatically results in efficient and ever increasing, production
d) education has become inefficient, too-progressive and unaccountable
e) if education is made accountable it will automatically become more efficient and productive.

Concerns about accountability have initiated a whole gamut of national criterion, standardised curricula and assessments, performance indicators and so on (Apple 1999). These in turn have established new forms of administration, control and governance (Taylor et al. 1997).

This version of decentralisation derives from liberal ideologies of free-market choice. It is not ‘common-sense’, neutral, or apolitical. It assumes:

1. The same economic laws of supply and demand governing commodities markets, should govern schools
2. Free markets, and the choices they offer, create better opportunities for all because providers are made accountable when bad products are driven out by good products
3. Free markets produce greater equality because the desire for social and personal gain motivates people to acquire skills and status (Cookson 1999).

In the Third World decentralisation goes under the name of ‘structural reform’ and is imposed by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as part of the adjustment package used to facilitate economic growth. In Australia, as in England, America and Canada, similar economic rationalist or monetarist reforms go under the name of ‘decentralisation’ and are imposed by neo-liberals to facilitate free market forms of globalisation. These include: 1) standardisation of the curriculum and assessment; 2) local management schemes; 3) devolution of budgets; 4) devolution of power to local communities and schools; 5) privatisation of public schools, charter systems and vouchers; 6) increased corporate investment (Kamat 2000, Taylor et al. 1997).

If markets were able to distribute goods and services adequately, then income distribution, poverty and unemployment would not be so imbalanced nor growing so rapidly. Indeed, it has been argued that monopoly, control and market domination are the key to capitalist success and profit, not competition and choice (Cookson 1999).

The idea that market-wise schools will offer everyone a rich array of educational opportunities and choices is crude and naive. Decentralisation results in centralised practices which actually reduce the range of alternatives and choices. Moreover, it makes things easier for the already privileged because middle-class parents and students are more able to make rational and utilitarian choices about goods and services.

Because educational systems do not operate on a level playing field they cannot offer corresponding products or outcomes. The question of how we might address the privilege associated with certain schools and social groups will not be answered by standardising everything, leaving schools to the whims of the market, or putting them under threat of bankruptcy on the assumption that better choices will magically materialise.

Choices and Alternatives

Decentralisation aims to provide opportunities for ICT skills development and the possibility of shared participation in the growing knowledge economy. Its reforms are played out in a world where everything is seen to vie against every thing else to secure comparative advantage and where the ‘great vision’ for education is the creation of a twenty-first century techno-wise producer/consumer citizen.

The sheer intricacy of languages and logics associated with economic rationalist reforms and restructurings paralyse our efforts to formulate real alternatives. New designs for schooling, curricula, and pedagogy have to be mashed though economic rationalist vocabularies and neo-liberal blueprints thereby risking cooption to the same instrumentalist means-end logistics. For instance, new approaches are frequently argued for on the grounds that they equip students with the multiple, adaptable, and
transferable skills needed meet the needs of a rapidly changing technological environment.

Questions of social inequality become subsumed to instrumental objectives. Reiterating the importance of ICT skills may get change onto the agenda but is troubling on a number of counts. First, it can prepare students only for a world that currently exists, and its efforts to match the needs of a fast, flexible, unpredictable future may return a future we never really wanted. Second, the creation of a new ICT-literate generation will not make more space at the top, or reduce the poverty gap; rather as Galbraith, cited in Cookson (1999) argues, there will be a deskilling effect which creates new ‘techno-wizzes’ at the bottom. Third, the information revolution consolidates finance and power in the hands of a few dividing the world into the information haves and information have-nots. Finally, and this problem also haunted reproduction theorists, education comes to stand for everything; individual achievement, social mobility, economic development, personal liberation, moral advancement and civilisation itself. Personal success and mobility come to mean group mobility and the achievement of social inequality.

The task ahead is thus not entirely one of identifying and understanding what is going on but figuring out how to do things differently, without setting these up as the only way to go. ICT skills are not intrinsically liberating or oppressive; neither are they automatically progressive or valuable. Like most things they can be subverted, thwarted, and redirected into something else again.

Pauperisation, over-consumption, and over-production threaten planetary survival and do not fit neatly into the realms of traditional subject disciplines. Neither do problems arising from the ‘extraordinary ethnicisation of culture’ which currently spill over in virulent forms of particularism and localism, nationalism, xenophobia and the establishment of identity through negation of others (McCarthy 1998). These things require resourceful interdisciplinary thinking and practice. They require generative capacity and confidence to imagine social alternatives and the cultivation of ‘cultures of civic concern and courage’ (Kenway & Bullen, 2000: 272).

If the twenty-first century techno-wise kids could not care less about inequality, then this too, like social inequality itself, is a condition of our own making. To recognise that it is also within the reach of our unmaking speaks of an optimism that is infinitely more sustaining than the frenzied anxieties of market-speak edu-business. While we should not over inflate the capacity of education to initiate change, and while education may as well be part of the problem as part of the solution, I believe that it is able to open up spaces of commitment and community. Education incites us to ‘dare to know’, not as Kant would have it, to expose the ‘truth’ about things previously shrouded in metaphysics and theology, but to ‘dare to know’ by opening things up, trying things out, setting things in play and thinking things anew. To ‘dare to know’ though hopeful, uplifting, disrupting, inspirational, creative imaginings and critical undertakings.

References
