

*The Language of the Unheard*, John Falzon

### **Teaching and learning resources**

1. John Falzon uses the words of poets who have been social activists for change in a world of injustice in order to express his own views on those who are 'unheard'.

Cesar Vallejo wrote his poetry for the 'illiterate'. Pablo Neruda talked about his inspiration for hope: "I couldn't teach anyone anything except what I have lived."  
p. 33

Both of these poets were from Latin America and witnessed the cruelty of military regimes and the effects on the poor. The Chilean dictator, Pinochet, tortured and murdered people for his own political agenda. Many poets, writers and artists have written about this terrible stain on their country's history.

- In view of the poets' experiences, what do you think they mean in the above quotes? Look up information about their lives and works to get a fuller understanding of their perspectives.
- Are there other countries being oppressed by their governments at present who are focused on creating a social division between the rich and the poor?

2. Falzon defines solidarity as 'taking a side, instead of being taken by a side'.

- In your view, what is solidarity among people? How important is it in bringing about change?

Two social justice champions understood solidarity and demonstrated their commitment to siding with the poor through their courage and their legacy: Archbishop Helder Camara and Frederick Ozanam.

- Discuss the similarities and differences between these two famous social activists.

3. In Australia, poets Bobbi (Roberta) Sykes and Jack Davis portray our treatment of Indigenous people on the margins, and those who have died in custody, as being shameful and degrading at a humanity level. Falzon states that it is only through solidarity that we can take a stand against this injustice and give all people their dignity.

- In small groups, read these poems below by the two Aboriginal poets and compare/contrast their poetic style.

p. 20

'...Write of life/the pious said  
forget the past/the past is dead.  
But all I see/in front of me  
Is a concrete floor/a cell door/and John Pat.\*'

– Jack Davis

*\*John Pat was a young Aboriginal man who died in custody after being beaten by police.*

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'...We must count them/  
We must count them/  
For if we do not  
They will have died in vain.'

– Bobbi Sykes, 1988, *Final Count*.

- What emotions do these poems evoke?
- Are they effective in getting their messages across? How?
- What social justice issues are being referred to?
- Can these issues be considered universal or unique to Australia?
- What is your stand on our treatment of Aboriginals in these two issues?
- How do you feel about the statistic quoted 'that on average, one Aboriginal dies in custody every month'?
- Make a list of 'legal' reasons and another list of 'social justice' reasons why imprisonment and treatment of Aboriginals is acceptable/non acceptable to you.

4. 'Locked up and locked out.'

Discuss this line in context of our treatment of Aboriginals.

5. Write a short poem using a similar style to Sykes and Davis from a compassionate viewpoint in solidarity with the victims.

6. The thrust of the speech by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2011, titled: 'Closing the Gap' about Aboriginal disadvantage, was that real efforts need to be made by individuals. Read excerpt from speech. (p. 29)

- Politicians use rhetoric to address social issues. How did Ms Gillard use rhetoric in hinting, but not stating, that Aboriginals are responsible for bringing on their own 'misfortune'?
- In light of the Stolen Generation, how is this true/not true in your opinion?

7. Read stories from the 'Australian Human Rights Commission' website, from the 'Bringing them home' page.

[http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social\\_justice/bth\\_report/index.html](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html)

- What were the effects of the removal of Aboriginal Children from their parents and to what extent has the government's apology healed the wound? What was the response from those affected by the Stolen Generation policy?
- Watch the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence*, based on the true story of Aboriginal children forcefully removed from their parents. Discuss the movie in light of human rights.
- In the award winning recent Australian movie *The Sapphires*, one of the main characters was taken from her mother and raised in a 'white' household and always struggled with her identity. How does the film portray her struggle and do you think she finally came to an acceptance of her heritage?

8. On page 48, Falzon states that our problem is *inequality* and that it's not a question of anyone's behaviour that caused this. There is no difference, in his opinion, between the 'deserving' and the 'not deserving' poor. He says, 'We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behaviour; blaming people for their own poverty, as is often the case with people who are homeless or in jail...'

- Sketch a mind map of the destructive cycle of poverty and imprisonment. What are the causes that might reduce someone to poverty and, in order to get out of their circumstances, end up breaking the law? How does this impact on everyone else? Are there better solutions than what is being done at the moment?
- Search your conscience. What are your initial prejudices of someone who lives on the edge of society and is marginalised? You may consider the person to be one who:
  - ❖ lacks in skills and education
  - ❖ has always been homeless
  - ❖ is on the dole
  - ❖ is addicted to drugs or alcohol
  - ❖ is a criminal
  - ❖ has a mental illness.
- Find examples where these prejudices and stereotypes can be disputed. Consider children's author J. K. Rowling who was on a single parent pension when she wrote her famous books. Discuss the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* to understand the cycle of poverty.

9. Falzon argues that Australia has the lowest unemployment benefits in the development world and that it is part of the cycle of helplessness. How ironic is this fact in view that we are one of the richest countries in the world and that Australian mining magnate, Gina Rinehart, is considered the richest woman in the world?

- Read online the recent response by Families Minister Jenny Macklin, who was asked if she could live on \$35 per week on Newstart Allowance. When she replied 'yes' it caused a great deal of controversy and backlash from the general public.
- Using the internet look up government agencies for information on :
  - Unemployment benefits
  - Youth Allowance
  - Austudy
  - Single parent
  - Carer
  - Disability
  - Aged pension
- Devise a budget based on one of these benefit schemes:
  - ❖ How would you be able to live a life of dignity based on these sums?
  - ❖ How restricted would this lifestyle be?
  - ❖ Is there a pattern or cycle from one generation to the next based on helplessness?
  - ❖ Any suggestions as to how this cycle could be broken?
  - ❖ What agencies/activists or church organisations are trying to bring about this change?

10. Falzon shares his strong views on 'shame'. (p. 51)

Some of his views are considering: children detained behind razor wire (refugees), the Stolen Generation and the Northern Territory Intervention.

He is joined by author and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, and poet Tomas Borge, who agree that historical colonisation has a history of blame and that the hidden poor are now part of our landscape.

- ❖ How do people fall through the cracks and end up marginalised?
  - ❖ What is neo-liberalism and how is it to blame for the global financial crisis that has caused more of the 'hidden' poor?
  - ❖ Is poverty demonised? What does that mean to you?
  - ❖ What is the effect on families and self esteem?
- 'If social movements are about a struggle and suffering, then courage is born from this.' (p.62) Do you agree? Discuss.

11. Look at your local graffiti or go online to see some famous graffiti, especially during times of social struggle. Find images and share with the class. Consider what has been poured into these visual acts. Where did they come from?

12. John Falzon agrees with sociologist Eva Cox: that The Northern Territory Intervention failed because it was designed to take away dignity rather than as a means of harnessing the energy of collective hope. (p. 77)

‘The intervention has failed because of what was done and the way it was done, and it did not consult or engage with local people or, in many cases, address their problems.’ (p. 78)

- Structure an argument for and against the implementation of an intervention in Aboriginal communities and the success/failure of the plan so far
- What solution does the author offer in view of the role of NGOs (Non Government Organisations)?
- What is your modern interpretation of the 15<sup>th</sup> century poem—in the days of the feudal system—on the profiting by the wealthy of criminalising what was once not a crime?

‘The law locks up the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common\*  
But leaves the greater villain loose  
Who steals the common from under the goose.’ (p. 84)

\* (land owned by everyone in village)

13. Many dispossessed indigenous people of the world have experienced this situation when they ‘sold’ their land to colonial powers, or were simply being forced off the land. Australia was considered *terra nullius* (belonging to no one) and so it was simply taken over by white settlers without payment to our first people. It wasn’t until the Mabo case that constitutional law amended this grievance.

- Find out more about the Mabo Native Title Act and Eddie Mabo, who campaigned for indigenous land rights.

14. The Federal Parliament has passed a Bill (February 2013) recognising indigenous people as the first Australians as a precursor to constitutional recognition. Prime Minister Julia Gillard has referred to this issue as ‘the unhealed wound that even now lies open at the heart of our national story’ and the Opposition Leader as, ‘this stain on our soul.’ (*The Age*, Feb 14, 2013)

This comes five years after the government’s apology (in 2008) to the Aboriginals for the Stolen Generation.

- Do you think these acts of reconciliation by the government will have any real and practical positive outcomes for marginalised Aboriginal communities? Discuss.

- The words 'unhealed wound' and 'stain on our soul' are poetic expressions which evoke strong emotional responses. Are they sincere expressions or just rhetoric? Discuss and debate.

15. In the US, 50% of people experiencing homelessness are from foster care, mental health care, imprisonment and even military service. (p. 93)

- Do you think the Australian statistics would be similar? Where would it differ? Why?

On page 97, Falzon states that Australia is a highly unequal society with the richest 20% households owning 63% of the net wealth.

- Look up the basic award wages:

<http://www.fairwork.gov.au/pay/national-minimum-wage/pages/default.aspx>

- How is it possible with rising prices in basic living needs for individuals and families able to live with some form of economic security?

16. Falzon claims that there is a need for greater redistribution of services and resources. There is a global agreement of basic human rights set out in the UN's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Article no. 25 is particularly relevant to this discussion.

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>

- Do you agree on all the articles in the human rights charter? Do you have anything to add?

17. Frederick Ozanam's view on charity and distribution of wealth: 'Charity may heal the wounds but it does not stop the blows.' (p. 101)

- What do you feel he was referring to? Is it still relevant today?

18. Samuel Ruiz Garcia, former Bishop, stated: 'The only question we will have to answer at the end of time is how we treated the poor.' (p. 100)

- What is the Falzon's message for improving the lives of the unheard? (p. 101) Do you believe we have failed as a civilised people to obliterate poverty and inequity?

19. Falzon describes the anti-liberation of the New Paternalism as 'people being treated like young children, who supposedly have no capacity to make decisions

or take control' and 'is really to control and coerce people on the basis of race, class, gender and disability.'

He lists those who are marginalised and how paternalism views them as largely to blame for this.

Rap and Hip Hop music movements have voiced popular sentiments against this type of control over the marginalised. Rappers often consider themselves as coming from marginalised backgrounds—social outcasts who speak out (literally, in their songs) about social justice issues. Their lyrics highlight the discrimination and economic disadvantages the marginalised face day to day.

- Do a class survey of those who enjoy songs by popular rap and hip hop artists. What are the correlations between the artists and their message?
- Does the message transcend US ghetto culture and is relevant to us in Australia? Explain.
- Eminem is not the stereotypical African American rapper. What makes him so popular? What is the message in his lyrics? Is it relevant at a universal level? Does he convey his message successfully? How?

Compare our Indigenous songwriters and singers to the US rappers and contrast/compare their styles and message. Some examples:

- Archie Roach
- Yothu Yindi
- Troy Cassar-Daley
- Christine Anu
- Jessica Mauboy
- Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu (sings in his native language)

20. Revolution in history has been a result of a struggle between ideologies and unfair treatment of the masses. From the civil war in America, to self government in South Africa; from racial discrimination rights, to the suffragettes and feminist movement.

- List the major revolutions, including the French Revolution as portrayed in *Les Miserables*, and those of Latin American countries where poets and writers have left a legacy through those who sacrificed their lives for freedom; or who simply had no choice, as in the case of those tortured and killed by the Pinochet regime's reaction to the Popular Unity Governments' attempts to create a fairer society. (p.118)
- Does the fight for fairness have to be deeply personal if it is to carry any weight?

- Closer to home, think of the civil uprisings in Australian history: the Bligh rebellion, the Eureka Stockade, the workers strikes of history and the more recent ones. Have any of these struggles been successful? How?

21. Falzon is alarmed at the possibility of 21<sup>st</sup> Australia remaining stuck in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (p. 127)

- What were some of his comparisons between these eras? Do you agree?

22. The poem, 'Love Song' on page 128 is an insightful observation of how the marginalised see themselves in society.

- What is the main point the poet makes? Support your answers from quotes from his poem. What is the significance of Australia Post? Is it a poem of hope?

23. John Falzon firmly believes in the power of stories for bringing about hope and fairer social changes. The stories of people living on the edge, the marginalised—those who are not mainstream—have transformative powers. It enables people to be part of their struggle.

- Discuss this in view of the stories from the Stolen Generation, and new popular movies such as *Bran Nue Dae* and *The Sapphires*.

23. What is your opinion of Falzon's final poem as a summary of his book on the voices of the unheard? (p. 146.)

'If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.  
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then  
let us work together.

We are not waiting for a revolution.

We are quietly making one.

Even if, when we die, we realise we have only carried a single grain of  
sand to the building site of love.'

– Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal Activists in Queensland

- What's the difference between coming to help someone and coming to work together towards liberation for everyone? Do you think this distinction is important? How come?