A transformative pedagogy to challenge the dominant discourse about asylum seekers in Australia

By

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own work except where stated to the contrary and that it is not substantially the same as any other dissertation that has previously been submitted for a degree at any other university.

_____________________________
Kathryn Jane Choules
Abstract

By the end of the 20th Century a major global social issue had become the movement of people fleeing countries affected by war, religious persecution, ethnic tension, political repression and poverty. Large numbers of people were claiming asylum under the international Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Since the mid-1990s the Australian government progressively hardened its attitude to asylum seekers and implemented one of the harshest responses in the Western world. Although the policies implemented have been held to breach a variety of international human rights conventions, they have received popular support. The dominant discourse about asylum seekers in Australia was characterised by fear, ignorance and rejection.

This research challenges the dominant discourse and is an expression of my commitment to social justice. It involved the design and implementation of a 6-week community education programme on asylum seekers for Australian residents. Through the project I explored how a diverse group of Australian residents experienced and responded to a pedagogy that went against the grain of the dominant discourse about asylum seekers. Using critical pedagogy, critical postmodernism, cultural studies, popular education and feminist pedagogies, I sought to create a transformative pedagogy. Through the empirical data generated I developed situated theory that would be of use to social change educators. The research embodies the cyclical process of action and reflection/practice and theory informed by the tradition of critical social research.

The participants in the research who attended the community education programme were largely from the dominant cultural group (White, Anglo-Celtic Australians) but their attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees covered the broad range found in the community. Their participation in the programme thus resulted in a wide range of responses. To locate and describe the participants I created three categories based on the competing ideological positions held: monoculturalist, multiculturalist and globalist.
The notion of pedagogical space created through the transformative pedagogy was theorised under the categories of safe, social, dialogical, democratic and empathetic spaces. The dissertation highlights the importance of self-awareness, reflexivity and listening in all of these spaces. It moves on to examine how the participants responded to the new knowledge that was generated through ideology critique. The significance of challenging the ‘commonsense’ of the dominant discourse through credible alternative sources of information emerged from the data. However, the monoculturalist participants actively resisted the challenge implicit in the pedagogy. The ways in which this resistance occurred are analysed. Notwithstanding the resistance, their levels of fear, misinformation and acceptance of the harsh treatment of asylum seekers decreased through their participation. For those participants already challenging the dominant discourse, the ways in which they used the experience of the community education programme to strengthen their position are analysed. How they acted as agents to engage in a more profound way with the issue emerged during the programme.

The research concludes with two important theoretical developments. The first is located within the tension that exists between the pedagogy’s striving for greater moments of freedom and the normativity of all pedagogical processes. It explores the question of whether social change educators should discuss their social justice vision and ideological positions within the educative process. The second theoretical development comes from using the notion of ‘privilege’ to analyse the social justice issue of asylum seekers. The notion of globally privileged citizenship is developed as a way forward and a tool that can be used by social change educators.
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Abbreviations

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics
ASIO – Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
CARAD – Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees
CEP – Community education programme
DIMIA – Department of Immigration Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
SLA – Statistical Local Area
R&SL – Returned and Services League
TPV – Temporary Protection Visa
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UN – United Nations
WTO – World Trade Organisation

Asylum seeker: A person who is outside her or his country of nationality and seeks to have refugee status accorded under the Refugee Convention.

Collaborative team: The team of people who collaborated in the development and implementation of the community education programme.

Community education programme: The education programme about asylum seekers for Australian residents created for this research project and implemented over a six-week period during winter 2003 in East Victoria Park, Western Australia.

Productive: ‘Productive’ refers to pedagogical processes and outcomes that are consistent with, and conducive of, social justice.
Problematise: This term is used in two distinct senses. Firstly, it is the notion of making problematic the commonsense of the dominant discourse, of examining its social construction and rendering the ordinary, extraordinary. Secondly, it is the pedagogical technique of problem posing.

Programme: The community education programme.

Reflexivity: Reflexivity is the deliberate reflection on actions or thoughts. It is a second level of consciousness or awareness in which we stand back from an experience or thought process and consciously reflect on it.

Refugee: A person who has been accorded refugee status under the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). That is, a person who:

owing to well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (Article 1A(2) Refugee Convention)

Social change pedagogy: Pedagogy that seeks the realisation of a society characterised by social justice.