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Wrestling with schools, schooling and educational research (Personal Reflections on the European Union-supported Educational Research 1995-2003: Briefing Papers for Policy Makers)

I must admit that I approached the European Union-supported educational research 1995-2003: Briefing papers for policy makers with a sense of trepidation. As a researcher who defines himself as socially critical, I wondered about the dynamics of a policy document that was published by the bureaucracy that has, in some form, a vested interest in the structure and operation of education in its various guises. In turning my attention to this review, I decided to focus my attention on the third guiding question that argues education and training "are strongly interconnected with concerns that include citizenship and democratic participation, inequalities and social justice, cultural diversity and quality of life" (Millei, 2005). The Briefing Papers include recommendations on democracy and citizenship, social exclusion and equality, gender and dealing with mental illness in schools.

As a socially critical researcher, it is important to name myself and my interests. I have been a secondary school teacher in Australia for nine years, primarily as a teacher of upper school History and English Literature. I am currently a candidate in the PhD programme at Murdoch University, where my research involves looking at the construction of the 'good' and the 'bad' student in secondary schools, and how this construction is a productive force aimed at privileging certain kinds of students. I see this as being instrumental in the ways that power is deployed in educational institutions. For me, this project is strongly aligned with my social justice agenda of making schools freer places for students. My research is heavily informed by Foucault's postmodern critique of social institutions such as schools. Through his work, Foucault hoped to challenge the ways that we think and the commonsense rationality found in institutions such as schools:

My role - and that is an emphatic word - is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes that have been built up at a certain moment during history, and this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed. (Ball, 1990)

It would appear that the document European Union-supported research 1995-2003: Briefing papers for policy makers is imbued with a sense of awareness of the significance of education as a key player in the relations of power that construct our society. For example, in Briefing Paper 41: Social exclusion and equality in education, one of the key recommendations was that there was needed "an institutionalist and evolutionary approach to inequality/social exclusion in education and training" (Briefing Paper 41). This underscores an awareness of the school as a place that is productive, and that what is produced can too often be "deeply flawed, dominated as it is by a meritocratic system which rewards the children of the already successful, leaving the unsuccessful untouched by the opportunities that the school system affords" (Symes & Preston, 1997). I believe that research to address these inequities needs to be done at the level of the local school and local community to effect change.

Part of the challenge for educational researchers in Australia is how to reorganise and reinvigorate a school system to meet the needs of all stakeholder groups in education, students, staff, parents and the wider community. This reshaping of the way that we see education needs to be done with a social justice agenda in mind. It needs to be about organising the system to redress inequalities and disadvantage in a concerted way, where that systemic approach to issues of social justice and equity are communicated to the grassroots - to the teachers and staff of every school. Using Foucault, I see an examination of the types of power relations found in schools as a way of advancing a socially critical agenda in schools. Through unmasking these relations of power in schools, greater possibilities exist to understand how schools operate and the effects of schooling.

The challenge for me, and what inspires my research, is the desire to empower participants in the school system to become socially critical thinkers who are able to make decisions informed by a more problematic view of society and the notions of privilege and disadvantage. I think that this desire requires a very clear definition of a democratic school system that works for all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, school governing bodies and the wider community. To do this, I advocate examining concepts such as democracy to see how schools and schooling could become better places for all.

The research done through the European Union-supported educational research 1995-2003 covers a wide variety of both approaches and solutions to perceived problems within the education system. Some of the research focus comes from a position that there is a sense of declining involvement of people in the decisions that affect their lives. As a result, there is a focus on 'Active Citizenship' that seeks, among other things, to "regenerat[e] a sense of community and collective responsibility". I find it interesting that the European research should highlight social concerns that are a very real issue in Australian education. In Western Australia, recent curriculum change has required schools to address the idea of active citizenship in the Society and Environment subject. This curriculum change mandates that as part of the curriculum, students are given the opportunity to

...demonstrate active citizenship through their behaviours and practices in the school environment, in accordance with the principles and values associated with the democratic process. (Curriculum Council of Western Australia, 1998)

This reads very similarly to Briefing Paper 64, which advocates "active citizens as agents of change that reflexively act upon their social, political and institutional environment for the 'public good'" (Briefing Paper 64). However, I believe that it presents a serious challenge for an undemocratic system to 'teach' democracy. Students are very aware of the relations of power around them, and the ways that the rhetoric of freedom, individual choice and decision are offset by processes of control and surveillance. I have a suspicion that changing the curriculum focus will not engender the changes required where the system itself works to oppose a social justice agenda based on democratic principles.

In Australia, I see a corresponding rise in concern about the ways that the traditional sense of community, if it ever existed, has been eroded to the detriment of the lives of Australians. Globalisation in Australia has not been as obvious as in Europe with the advent of the European Union. However, it has still manifestly altered many of the paradigms that affect the lives of Australians. One of the downsides of this has been the "institutional and social lack of trust" that seems to permeate our media, and through this, people's values and attitudes (Briefing Paper 64). Education as one of the key institutions concerned with establishing and maintaining accepted social norms is increasingly under attack. Currently the news media is inundated with reports of how schools and teachers are failing to meet the needs of the community. I would argue that these debates are too often based on a very narrow view of the purpose of education, that of educating for skills and the work place. Symes and Preston call this view of education 'instrumental', concerned as it is with "human capital theory which holds that human beings are an economic resource" (Symes & Preston, 1997). These debates fail to address the transformative potential in schools as places where social justice issues can be addressed.

The thing that fascinates me with educational research is the tension contained within the institution. I marvel at the ways that the whole system conspires to maintain a pedagogy and curriculum that has more in common with 18th century Christian pastoral guidance than it does with living in the 21st century (Hunter, 1994). I marvel at the ways that power relations are played out within schools, as a strategy of confirming social values that have not changed much since the advent of mass public schooling. I marvel at the rhetoric of schooling for democracy in a system that is manifestly undemocratic. In fact, it makes more sense to argue that schools actively work to reward docility and compliance in staff and students than they do to advance what I see as crucial skills for the 21st century: compassion, socially-critical thinking, collaborative learning and an engagement with the community, at a local, national and international level.

For me, the wonder of education is that whilst the system is manifestly undemocratic, there exists pockets of potential, or practice that demonstrate that education can meet the needs of the 21st century. This could be the examples of wonderful practice by teachers that shine like beacons as examples to other teachers. It could be the compassionate policies of some school leaders to tailor a school experience for students who have needs outside of what we may deem 'normal'. It could be examples of collective student action to bring about change for the betterment of others. These things happen everyday in schools. To me, this shows that there exists a potential in schools for change to occur, both as a process and as an outcome.

For these reasons, I believe that initiatives like "Engaging People in Active Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe" are important in any education system. The crux of the matter is, however, how we decide what an active citizen is. At the basis of educational research I believe, should be a consideration of what key terms such as 'citizen', 'democracy', 'freedom', 'autonomy' and 'good'

really mean, and an examination of how the system of education deals with the inevitable tension between the individual good and the collective good.

Questions of education and training are interconnected with questions such as active citizenship and democratic participation. However, as researchers I think we need to be clearer about how we envisage democracy, social justice and citizenship working in schools. I think that this is an imperative for educational research in Australia, as we begin to consider how to locate a myriad of voices into a traditional view of Australianness that has tended to see itself as a monolithic group of people sharing similar values, experiences and ideals. I believe that we tend to transfer this monolithic view to terms such as democracy and citizenship, without ever really considering how these terms when used in an uncritical way can marginalise and silence particular groups. It is this desire to open up the closed processes of education that motivates my research.

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