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# TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: INTERNATIONAL SOURCES AND UNIVERSALISTIC DISCOURSE IN AUSTRALIAN TEACHER EDUCATION 1900-1950

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Australia has a long history of what has been pilloried as ‘cultural cringe’, and of bemoaning its isolation from ‘overseas’ developments. In recent years, the valuing of ideas and practices from elsewhere has been transformed under the rubric of ‘world best practice’ within a global economy and culture, both in political discourse generally, and in a raft of reports on the need for reform of teacher education in particular (see Vick, 2006a). Here, I document overseas borrowings in the form of texts in teacher education during the first half of last century, focusing on teachers colleges in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. On the one hand, I seek to show that Australian teacher education has always sought to establish itself in relation to international rather than merely local practice. On the other hand, I aim to demonstrate that this was neither a ‘cultural cringe’ nor a desperate bid to conform to other parts of the world, but a consequence of an understanding that proper practice was derived from universal truths and principles, independent of any geographic reference points (Vick, 2006a).

## **PROGRAMS AND SUBJECTS**

Each of the teachers colleges in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century offered a comparable array of subjects within a similarly structured program (Hyams, 1979). While details of nomenclature varied across institutions, all

programs featured a division between foundational and applied studies. The foundations were subdivided into social (historical, comparative, policy and administration) studies, studies of the proper purposes of education (in part historical and comparative, but also drawing on social and moral philosophy) and (largely psychological) studies of characteristics of students and the nature of learning.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between foundational and applied subjects was blurred in two ways. First, both within and between institutions, the nomenclature of subjects was inconsistent, with discipline-named subjects (for example, Educational Psychology) and topic-named subjects (for example, Principles of Education or General Methods) sitting side by side. Second, elements of the disciplinary ‘foundations’ re-appeared in the applied subjects: for example, psychology constituted a core foundational discipline but also underpinned both ‘general methods’ studies (the broad principles of learning on which pedagogy and curricular organisation should be based) and ‘special methods’ (the application of these principles to teaching the specific subjects that comprised the school curriculum).

These distinctions and relations between subjects can be demonstrated using the example of the two-year course at Sydney Teachers’

College in the late 1930s. The subject Education included:

*Content and methods of teaching of the several parts of the primary school course. The primary school pupil; mental and physical character; individual differences.* (Teachers' College, Sydney, 1937: 11)

It contrasted with Educational Psychology which included:

*The motivation of learning. What psychology is – its methods. Fundamental motives and their educational significance. Principles of abnormal psychology.... The psychology and pedagogy of cognition.... The physical basis of mind. Attention. Perception: Gestalt psychology. Imagery and imagination.* (Teachers' College, Sydney, 1937: 12)

The relation between theory and application is well caught in the comment, under the heading 'Principles of Teaching', that 'for the most part the principles of teaching will be studied in conjunction with... Educational Psychology', followed by a list of specific topics, such as lesson planning, to which psychological principles would be applied. (Teachers' College, Sydney, 1937: 12).

## **SUBJECTS AND TEXTS**

For most, if not all subjects, texts were prescribed. The use of texts allowed staff to draw on, and present to the students, ideas endowed with authority. Their mere existence as published texts itself constituted one form of authorisation. They bore their own internal enunciations of authority, in the form of the credentials customarily printed under the author's name. Thus, for instance, their respective title pages identified J.J. Findlay (1927) as 'Professor of

Education in the University of Manchester', and John Adams (1901) as 'Professor of Education at the University of London, Principal of the London County Council Day Training College'. Australian texts followed the same principle, even if the status of the authors was sometimes different; the title page of Elijah and Cole (1944) identified the authors as Senior Inspector and Inspector of Schools respectively in the Victorian Education Department.

In addition, texts carried the authority that flowed from being endorsed and used by College staff (for example, Department of Education, New South Wales, 1924, 34-80; Department of Education, South Australia, 1902, 154-155; Department of Education South Australia, 1920, 588-599). They were treated largely uncritically. Lecturers' notes drew on them, and represented them essentially as factual truths (for example, Browne, n.d.), and student notes reflected and reproduced this treatment (for example, Lee, 1911; Hamilton, 1939). Finally, they were deployed as taken-for-granted reference points in examination papers (for example, Department of Education New South Wales, 1924: 175-178; Melbourne Teachers' College, 1937; Melbourne Teachers' College, 1950).

The texts paralleled the distinction between foundational and applied subjects. Thus, for instance, Cubberley's *Brief History of Education* (1922), Kandel's *Studies in Comparative Education* (1933), Sorley's *Moral Life* (1913), and Dumville's *Fundamentals of Psychology* (1915) offered expositions of their respective disciplinary knowledge bases without directly or centrally dealing with their relation to contemporary practice. They contrast sharply with Findlay's *Foundations of Education* (1927)

and McRae's *Psychology and Education* (1929), for example, in which philosophical historical and psychological principles, drawn from the respective disciplines, were brought explicitly to bear on the aims of education, educational administration, pedagogy and curriculum, and used to construct principled, normative frameworks for addressing practical issues. Even more pointedly related to practice were volumes such as Hughes and Hughes's *Learning and Teaching* (1937), Parker's *Talks on Teaching* (1883) and Wiggin's *Kindergarten Principles* (1896), while texts such as Elijah and Cole's *Method and Technique in Teaching* (1944), Cook's *The Play Way* (1917) and Middleton and Meldrum's *Teaching of Arithmetic* (1930) applied these principles in detail to specific techniques of content selection, classroom management, and instructional technique.<sup>2</sup>

### **LIBRARIES: 'READING MORE BROADLY'**

Libraries provided a second source of reading materials. They began essentially as repositories of the texts listed in course handbooks, with a handful of supplementary readings. Sydney Teachers' College provides the most comprehensively-documented case to explore. Here, until the 1930s, purchases amounting to around 60 titles a year were made on an annual or biennial basis through the Education Department (for example, Mackie, 1907a, 1907b).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, such purchases were subject to budgetary control, and the lists submitted were scrutinised for relevance and moral suitability (Boardman et al., 1995: 31) and sometimes trimmed (Director of Education, 1929; Mackie, 1929a, 1929b, 1929c).

By the late 1940s this had changed dramatically, with the library buying around 80 volumes each month (Sydney Teachers' College, 1948; c.f. Boardman, 1995: 82-84). Moreover, in contrast to the earlier practice, purchasing was more or less continuous and under autonomous College control, a routine part of the College's own management of its needs and resources.

### **A WIDE WORLD OF IDEAS**

A sample count of the places of publication indicates the diversity of origins of the materials. A complete count of texts purchased during 1948 shows that a total of 394 education texts (excluding 'general knowledge' texts, such as history, literature or science) came from the United Kingdom, reflecting and maintaining traditional economic and cultural ties to 'home'. An additional 72 were written and published in Australia; 71 were from the United States; 11 from France; four from Canada; three from New Zealand and one from each of Switzerland, South Africa, Denmark and the Netherlands (Sydney Teachers' College, 1948).

Within this overall distribution, the lists reveal some tendency for the different topics and disciplines to draw texts from various origins in differing proportions. Curriculum texts, for instance, were overwhelmingly either locally written and published or imported from Britain; education history, comparative education and psychology were split between Britain and the United States but with a small and growing sprinkling of Australian publications, especially in psychology, while there was a slight preponderance of American publications in general pedagogical literature. This uneven distribution of sources of different literatures

reflects a recognition that different fields of research and innovation were located in different centres. While many of these centres were located in overseas centres such as New York (more specifically, Columbia Teachers College) and London (in particular, the London Institute of Education), it also recognised the value of local work, not only on what might be seen as ‘local issues’ but in fields of broader, more general scientific, theoretical and practical interest (Vick, 2006a).

### **HUMAN NATURE: SCIENTIFIC AND MORAL TRUTH**

In many cases, apart from the fact that they were written in English, the national origins of these texts were of little direct relevance, and were reflected only minimally in the texts themselves. Psychology texts could be used regardless of origins because they addressed their subject matter in light of internationalised research and framed it in terms of the universal truths of science regarding the human mind. Even where ‘applied’ psychology texts, or psychology-grounded pedagogics texts, drew examples from the local context, what they illustrated were arguments and principles that were couched in terms of universal truths.

McRae (1929), for instance, discusses the ‘internal’ psychological issue of cognition, as common to all human beings, contrasting them *sui generis* with ‘the lower animals’ (McRae, 1929: 145). His treatment of the more seemingly social issue of behaviour, in the form of ‘the problem child’ invokes general truths about a universal human subject, in at least four ways. First, it involves a constant dialectic between universal attributes and specific social factors

(such as poverty). Second, it cites Australian examples McRae has encountered, English examples that Burt discusses and examples that Burt cites from American studies, without reference to the particular contexts of either the children or the research, taking them as comparable. Third, he consistently uses the definite article coupled to general ‘subject nouns’ – *the delinquent, the child* – as though individual children are exemplars of a singular, encompassing category. Fourth, he explains individuals’ behaviours by reference to universal attributes (for example, ‘the instinct of acquisition’) (McRae, 1929: 127-141). Each of these discursive moves takes general scientific knowledge of ‘people’ as universally true.

The same universalist tendency can be seen in what are essentially discussions of values. Thus Percival Cole, Vice-Principal at Sydney (1910-1944) and editor of a widely-used Australian text, mounted an argument that required curriculum to be the expression and embodiment of nothing less than civilisation itself. The curriculum, he argued, ‘must’ (his imperative) include such subjects as ‘mathematics and English’ since they ‘are regarded *by society* as essential to human welfare’ and reflect the ‘demands of civilization and the nature of the pupil’ (Cole, 1932: ix-x; italics added). While the reference to ‘civilisation’ is clearly historical, ‘the nature of the child’ refers back to psychological science. Moreover, an appeal to the authority of science—in this case the science of botany and its extension to ‘scientific gardening’ through the planting of good seed, careful cultivation and the reaping of rich harvests—in fact, underpins this whole passage. Thus, for instance, ‘even if by

chance' subjects such as 'heraldry and Choctaw... flourish better [than mathematics and English] on the native mental soil, they are not wanted; nor can they... afford the social equivalent of the former' (Cole, 1932: ix).

### **GENERAL PRINCIPLES, LOCAL CONTINGENCIES**

Discussions of the social functions of education, or the proper means of providing education, were seen as socially variable and contingent, and were constructed in relation to comparative and historical studies of education. Especially with historical texts, one might expect content to have been tied more or less directly to the specificities of particular nations, and to the country of authorship and publication, since their purpose was to provide knowledge specifically about the country of origin. Indeed, both historical and comparative texts featured accounts of national institutions, cultures, prerogatives and needs. Yet even here, both national origins and peculiarities were also relatively unimportant. What uncoupled them from their context was that they were written with an interest in how other countries had addressed and resolved (or not addressed or resolved) general problems of administration and practice in terms of particular values and principles.

In historical texts, this line of inquiry started by establishing a set of (classical) ideals to do with culture and democracy, then proceeded to explore past examples of falling away from or recovery of those ideals, through a narrative of long-term triumphant struggle resulting in the present (Cubberley, 1922; Quick, 1907). In doing so, historical texts of all origins constituted

collectively a canonical tradition placing Western education between social utility and individual development, as about rationality and truth, and about democratic values and practice, with a series of key reference points: Socrates and Plato, the medieval universities, Locke and Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel. Australians, through their British heritage, stood firmly in this line of descent. American ideas and practice were of particular interest for their special role in progressing the democratic ideas of that tradition. The common ground shared by all such texts gave these accounts authority and status as truth, subtending claims such as Cole's (above) about the relation between 'civilization' and the curriculum.

Comparative texts worked similarly in a more contemporary context. Thus the applicability to Australian education of American historical and comparative texts, for example, was not grounded in their American origins or the information they offered about American educational practices, *per se*. Rather, it lay in their focus on the problem of how to secure scientific and democratic principles at the heart of educational practice, a problem which was of central interest in Australian courses. The role of these texts in highlighting such principles is clearly reflected in Violet Lee's notes from her readings:

*USA: No country uses school more consciously in the development of citizens individually. The USA trains them to take their places as citizens and workers....*

*The old definition 'Education is the development of the whole man' is merely an ideal but there ARE PLACES in America where the ideal is in actual practice....*

*In the Philippines the Americans are trying to build up a whole manhood not by books [but by] trying to get them to understand modern democracy & citizenship. Americans say, 'We can do nothing with the grown ups. Let us tackle the children. Teach them English, bring them in touch with great ideas'.*

*Booker Washington College. Development of the whole man. Nothing left out. Arts, trades, drill, music. No one but negroes. Race lifting itself up by genius of great personality. (Lee, 1911)*

## CONCLUSION

Despite their universality, textbooks attract little formal notice in official documentary records, written student records or later student recollections (Adelaide Teachers' College, 1976-1981) or among historians of teacher education. Yet these texts constituted a body of knowledge that crossed national boundaries. This body of knowledge was far from seamless and singular, but the unmarked and unproblematic juxtaposition of texts from various parts of the world to form a composite 'literature of education' allowed them to constitute a 'universal' normative discourse of education, essentially transcending specific local, regional or national contexts and cultures. Thus, for at least a century, Australian teacher education has been firmly committed to a trans-national vision of 'best practice', where 'best' was derived not from a calculation of pragmatic outcomes of particular practices but from a body of normative principles grounded in what were constructed as universal scientific truths.

## NOTES

1. In most cases, throughout, general claims are derived from detailed documentation from a range of published and manuscript sources; specific references in these cases are exemplars only; in such cases, as here, they are cited as 'for example'.

2. Texts cited are selected from lists compiled from *Education Gazettes* for New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria and teachers college *Calendars*.

3. Text purchases until the 1930s can be traced from lists submitted by College Principals to Directors of Education for their approval, in the education correspondence files in the respective State Archives or Public Record Offices.

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