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Book Review - Critical Voices in Teacher Education: Teaching for Social Justice in Conservative Times.

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Barry Down & John Smyth (eds). New York, London: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg, 2012.

The central theme of this volume is that, in recent decades, education in Australia (and many other countries) has been taken over by a managerialist ideology which has “damaged the profession of teaching by reducing teacher autonomy, deskilling teachers’ work, standardising curricula and introducing prefab lessons and scripted curricula”(p 3). Accompanying this is a drive to “push teacher education towards a ‘back to basics’ version of teacher training” which, in turn, involves producing teachers who are “robotic technicians who unquestionably follow the instructions of others and who lack the temerity to ask how well those instructions serve their students” (p.3). According to one contributor “teaching is increasingly being shaped and controlled by a managerial class that receives its ideological orders from global predators like the OECD, World Bank, IMF which then warehouse these ideas through business councils and roundtables who constitute the major source of consultancy and educational advice to governments (p 85). An example of this orthodoxy is the “hoax” which has been perpetrated on young people by which they were persuaded that more education will get them better jobs. Teachers themselves have been led to accept “this upwardly mobility scam that is likely to come crashing down on all of us” (p. 86). How then, the book asks, can teacher educators fight back against this domesticating dogma? The answer is to create “critically reflective practitioners committed to teaching for social justice” (p.3). This will require a re-orientation of teacher education: “The challenge ahead is to reclaim teacher education programmes as sites for social transformation.” (p.3).

Some of the major themes of the book are:

1. The importance of “relationship teaching.” It is argued that the managerial approach to teaching is wrong because it blames teachers for outcomes beyond their control and prevents students from learning from and about failure. This leads to demoralised and cynical teachers and students who are “disengaged”—withdrawing from learning and eventually rejecting it by truanting and finally by “dropping out” of school (p.21). In contrast, relationship teaching respects the ability of students to identify the lives they want to lead and works to provide the skills and knowledge that they need to do that (p.22).
2. The existence of massive inequalities in Australia. It is estimated that 11% of Australians are in poverty compared to 7.9% in 1994. There is a widening gap between rich and poor and for aborigines a decline in educational achievement, employment opportunities and life expectancy (p.27). Accompanying and accentuating this economic disadvantage there is the racism which has also served to “demonise asylum seekers” and increased Islamophobia (pp. 27- 28). Thus there is need for students to be made aware of structural restraints which will involve
 - analysing school policies and practices which devalue the experiences of some students.
 - seeing schooling as a preparation for active citizenship not just a place to gain individual credentials.

- retrieving the language of ‘standards’ ‘rigor’ and ‘academics’ from conservative spokespeople and reframing it for social justice.
- 3 The tendency of middle class educators to harbour low expectations from working class students. Thus they assign them to “vocationally oriented courses” which constitutes “a pedagogy of poverty” (p.34) and severely limits the tertiary and employment opportunities for young people in low income areas. There is need for an inclusive common curriculum as a matter of social justice. (p.34) However, this must also involve “an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity” (p.35). Herein lies a major problem to which I shall return.
 - 4 The need to attach local curriculum discussions to wider social and international issues such as climate change, water scarcity, poverty and trade. (p. 36). This also requires the challenging of unjust local practices and policies so that students will “will become agents of change for themselves and for others in the quest for a more just society” (p. 39).
 - 5 The importance of confronting the current managerial ethos with a more participative/professional way of viewing teaching which involves critical thinking, questioning conventional wisdom, challenging authority and being sceptical of knowledge which is presented as “objective” but is often shaped by structures of power and interest.
 - 6 The need to confront the current government policies (NAPLAN, NPST, and Rewards for Greater Teachers) as totally inadequate to the task of reforming teaching because they “ensure that principals, teachers, students, families and their communities are held personally responsible when things go wrong not social systems” (p. 65). Teaching, the authors argue, is much more complex than these narrow measurements systems allow and the forces which influence student achievement extend far beyond the teacher and her classroom. One author (Down) reinterprets teacher standards in the light of a broader understanding of the work of teachers. (Chapter 5).

I am in almost total agreement with the analysis of the problem and agree with the need to reclaim teacher education by means of a more liberal educational philosophy which is concerned with the full development of individuals and the furtherance of a society focused on the common good. In particular I agree that the schooling hoax (“get an education and you will get a good job”) is a disaster for our youth and indeed I have been using the word “hoax” in this context since the policy was first broached in New Zealand in the later 1980’s. However I have a number of reservations about the papers in this book and how they tackle the problems:

- 1) Despite “teacher education” being a major part of the book’s title, the ‘critical voices’ have surprisingly little to say about teacher education and what they do say is remarkably unclear. It is true that in the final section of the book there are chapters devoted to different aspects of the teacher education programme (literacy, the arts, physical education, social studies) which suggest ways of using them to advance the idea of social justice. Chapter 14 on literacy teaching and Chapter 18 on sustainability are particularly good examples of this. But these papers do not seem to emerge from any clear idea of how teacher education as a whole ought to be organised and delivered. There are clues throughout: students should be provided with systematic examination of “forms of enquiry” (p.51); students are to be made aware of the importance of social class in their lives (p.100); there is to be “critical study of power, language, culture and history” (p 115); there should be discussions of “vintage films” (about teachers and education) such as “the Prime of Miss Jean Brodie”

and “Dead Poets Society” (p.142), but these are not well organised into a coherent programme.

- 2) Another central idea of the book, “social justice,” is also opaque. Only one chapter (Chapter 3) goes into the matter in any depth and it is not clear that the contributors agree on a definition. It seems that they are talking largely about the prevalence of racism in the wider society and sometimes about the class divisions of the society: suggestions seem to relate to making students aware of these aspects of society and schooling (in the process, as many contributors note, they have to face the indifference and even antipathy of many students to being made aware!). Chapter 18 deals well with the large issue of sustainability but apart from this there is little systematic consideration of “the common good,” or the existence of vast imbalances of wealth and power in the world, slave and child labour, the oppression of Third World countries, unjust labour policies, national policies of war etc. No contributor writes about (rather than mentions) climate change, surely the major social justice issue at present (there is no entry for it in the index), the role of technology in perpetuating injustice and the dominance of Kiddy Culture which surely influences teacher education students as much as those whom they will teach.
- 3) It is difficult to know whether contributors believe that there is knowledge which all teachers should have (universal knowledge if you like) or whether it is all relative to cultural groups. As noted earlier one contributor advocates an inclusive common curriculum as a matter of social justice (p.34) but this must also involve “an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity” (p. 35). This is fine but other commentators are not so clear that there should be an “inclusive curriculum” leaving the impression that localised “knowledge” might be all that the students gain from this form of teacher education. I would want to insist of the need for teacher education and school education to concentrate on the academic disciplines: surely our objection to managerialists is not that they advocate such subjects but that they want them taught in a dehumanising manner. In teacher education there is also need for thorough and objective (some of the contributors will reject this concept) grounding in the subjects which contextualise teaching: sociology, history, philosophy and comparative education. These can, of course, be enlivened and softened by reference to cultural and religious differences and by encouragement to praxis but without them there is the danger that teachers will merely “peddle personal ideologies and critically unreflected political mythologies” (p. 24).
- 4) My final criticism of the book is the language in which most of it is couched. As it stands it can be read only by those who are steeped in this highly theoretical language and probably already agree with the basic argument. I will give only one instance: we should “interrogate the modernist knowledge project that has created a culturally normative space from which the dominant culture has performatively engaged and subordinated all other ways of knowing and being in the world.” (p.144). If this means anything it should be possible to state it clearly. Whole chapters could be re-written for readability. Surely the point of “theory” is to illuminate, not obfuscate, reality.

Those who support the dominant approach to education know clearly what they want and their prescriptions can be grasped by everyone hence their political effectiveness. The same, sadly, cannot always be said of those who (oh so rightly) want a broad, humanising, liberating education that helps to create a just world. This book has identified the enemy and called for a new offensive: I do not think that it has armed its forces adequately.