Dreaming Our Future: Developing Democratic Professional Practice?[1]

Derrick Armstrong
University of Sydney

Abstract

This paper addresses issues in relation to recent criticism of teacher education, set in the broader context of political agitation for changes to the purposes, role and outcomes of education within society. The paper raises questions around the purpose of schooling and its role in modern societies and argues for the pedagogical importance of critical dialogue to a democratic conceptualisation of education and promotes the idea of professional education as democratic practice.

Professional Education in Crisis?

I had barely arrived in the country when I read an article in *The Australian* newspaper (Buckingham 2005) that poured scorn on the current standing of teacher education and saw in it the cause of an educational crisis of dire proportions. If this wasn't bad enough, as I read though the article and began to wonder just what I had let myself in for in coming to this country I found the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work picked out for particular criticism by the author of the article. It seems that the sin that the University had committed was in placing education in a Department of Social Work rather than in a Faculty of Science. Of course it didn't take long, even for a naïve outsider like me, to realise that the criticisms put forward by *The Australian* had to be understood as part of a larger political agitation for changes to the purposes, role and outcomes of education within society. Even so, it seems to me that there is a criticism here that needs to be examined more closely.

I take the argument in respect of science to be two-fold. The claim is that educational research is often not scientific, whereas it ought to be, and in consequence the practice of teacher educators is ill-informed and not evidence-based. I have some

sympathy for this view. It is a criticism that can also be directed against quite a bit of educational policy as well. I agree that there is a need for there to be a closer relationship between educational policy and evidence. Too often policy-makers fail to subject their ideas to any empirical scrutiny. Having defined the public 'good' in some way or another, politicians are often unwilling to specify the criteria by which their policies will be judged to have been successful or not. But the use of evidence in the evaluation of policy is not quite the same thing as basing policies upon evidence. *The Australian* article, like so many other criticisms of the unscientific character of educational research and teacher education that are invoked to justify a more technical approach to professional practice, makes assumptions that are both false and misleading (Giroux 1981). They are false because professional practice is unavoidably informed by value positions that are historically as well as socially grounded. Giroux (1981, p.154) has argued that they are mystifying because they misrepresent the nature of science 'in order to be silent about the underlying politics and interests in which they are grounded'.

An example may illustrate the problem. The argument is sometimes advanced by politicians that newly qualified teachers are ill-equipped to teach. Yet, the evidence upon which such claims are based is hard to find. In part the reason for this is that the claim is not based upon evidence at all. It is political rhetoric grounded in beliefs about what teachers ought to be doing in the classroom and therefore what teacher educators ought to be training teachers to do. It is a claim that is value-based, not evidence-based. But there is nothing wrong with that, so long as we recognise the argument for what it is, not for what it claims to be. Indeed, the argument emphasises the limitations of evidence and therefore of research in answering some types of question. We can only answer the question: 'Does pre-service teacher education adequately prepare teachers for the classroom' if we specify what it means to be a competent teacher. However, we cannot draw on evidence to answer this question in an absolute sense. The answer depends upon the historical and political context in which it is asked. It requires specification of the educational values and outcomes that such policies are seeking to achieve. We need to know more about the structural and organisational features that are considered desirable for pursuing these values. Then we need to understand how certain teaching and learning strategies are privileged because of their consistency with the educational goals that have been set, rather than because of their intrinsic merit.

Unfortunately, politicians, like journalists, sometimes commit the cardinal sin of poor research: that is, confusing facts and values. Facts are only meaningful as such when they stand in relation to a particular way of seeing the world; that is, in relation to theoretical propositions or value statements. Once positioned in this way, facts cannot arbitrarily be used to reinforce values (at least not in a way that has any scientific

credence), and this is where evidence does have an important role to play in the evaluation of policy. But values cannot be derived from facts. What crucially this means is that educational ideas are contested. This contestation is a form of democratic practice. However, it ceases to be such where certain ideas are imposed uncritically as incontestable truths. It is in this respect that the uses of 'evidence' actually become dangerous. That is to say, where democratic debate about values is curtailed by appeals to empirical evidence as an overarching and independent arbiter of what is 'good'. Empirical evidence cannot tell us how we should act or what we should value. However, it can help us to determine the validity of factual claims that are advanced in support of value positions. For instance, empirical evidence cannot tell us whether or not the learning of other languages is a good thing. On the other hand, if we do value this learning, research evidence can inform our understanding of the effectiveness of early exposure to other languages in the learning of those languages. On the combined basis of values about language learning and evidence of learning processes we can make a further value-based decision about the appropriateness of language teaching in the school curriculum.

There is another strand, however, to the argument put forward in *The Australian* about the sins of teacher education. This concerns the association of teacher education with social work in my own Faculty. We can leave aside without further comment the somewhat snide suggestion that social work is unscientific. It both is and it isn't in exactly the same ways as I have already argued in respect of education and for that matter in respect of medical science, physical science and so on. Values and facts may be different but this does not mean that they are dichotomous. The dichotomy between science and values is a false one precisely because the ways in which human beings perceive their world and act within it form part of the observable world.

The issue here about social work is more serious. I would suggest that what is really being criticised is the conceptualisation of education as concerned with the promotion of social welfare. In the latter part of the twentieth century the boundaries of social inclusion and exclusion began to be redrawn. The post war welfare project of social inclusion was shattered first by international economic recession and later by the new-found confidence of a capitalist economy no longer dependent on subsidies from the state and eager to spread its values of individualism across all areas of life. In the final decade of the twentieth century capitalism exploded into new markets, reducing social relations in all cultural settings, including education, to the exchange relations of the marketplace. The cost of social welfare has come to be seen by governments across the world as a crippling dependency-creating burden. Education has become a key site on which the battle to redefine the purposes, outcomes and costs of welfare is being fought. The separation of the education

system from an ideology of social welfare and the replacement of its explicit social role in advancing a citizenship of equal opportunities with a more narrow economic rationality is central to this reconstitution of purpose. As the category of the 'deserving poor' is minimised by policies designed to squeeze the poor and the vulnerable into either employment or destitution, social work too has been re-defined. Social workers, like teachers, sit uneasily in relation to these changes, but the context of the struggles of both for a professional identity in this new and uncertain world is not one of their own making. The disconnection between education and social work, however, is one that weakens both professions and restricts their ability to define their professional practice in terms of democratic social values. Both professions face a technicalisation of their knowledge and skills, conceptualised by the state in a value-neutral way; essentially, a de-professionalisation and de-politicisation of their practice. The linking of social work with education poses an implicit challenge to this new model of fragmented professionalism. It creates the opportunity for thinking not only about the relationship between the different public service professions but also a space within which thinking can take place (in the spirit of the famous critique advanced by C.Wright Mills 1959) about the relationship between private needs and public issues, or as Habermas (1989) might argue, a regeneration of the 'public sphere'. In its own small way what is going on in this faculty goes against the grain of public policy and poses a threat to the normalisation of that policy. This, I am happy to say, is precisely what a university should be doing!

Professionalism and Democracy

Wilfred Carr and Anthony Hartnett, in their book 'Education and the Struggle for Democracy', argued that in a society which takes democracy seriously issues about the ways in which teachers are themselves educated will always be central to the public educational debate' (1996, p.195). On the other hand, as these authors also noted, part of the ideological strategy of the political right is the creation of widespread public concern about teacher education through the adoption of the rhetoric of 'teaching quality', 'professional competence' and 'good practice'. By doing so, the problems of society are defined in ways that presume the inadequacies of the school system in meeting the new forms of society that have emerged and are articulated in the ideologies of neo-liberalism. The pedagogical model underpinning the neo-liberal educational ideology is fundamentally anti-democratic because it denies legitimacy to educational debate about the form and content of education. It constructs an ideological model of educational value and purpose that is then to be implemented as a technological project. Educational debate is prejudged by the ideology of neo-liberalism. Teaching is represented as a value-free technical activity. 'Good practice' becomes no more than a 'bureaucratically framed specification of competencies and skills' (Carr and Hartnett 1996, p.195). In the absence of

professional autonomy grounded in developing their students' capacity for democratic deliberation, critical judgement and rational understanding, teachers 'quickly become neutral operatives implementing the "directives" of their political masters and mistresses' (ibid.).

The crucial pedagogical importance of critical dialogue to a democratic conceptualisation of education has long been advocated. John and Evelyn Dewey (undated), for example, maintained

> The conventional type of education which trains children to docility and obedience, to the careful performance of imposed tasks because they are imposed, regardless of where they lead, is suited to an autocratic society. These are the traits needed in a state where there is one head to plan and care for the lives and institutions of the people. But in a democracy they interfere with the successful conduct of society and government. … Responsibility (in a democracy) for the conduct of society rests on every member of society (pp.303-4).

Another ground-breaking educational thinker of modern times, Jerome Bruner argued that developing skills of dialogue should be at the centre of teacher education because knowledge and ideas are both socially contextualised and contested. As Bruner pointed out, even in the domains of formal reasoning, logic and mathematics, the social context of discussion can be shown to be crucial. The educated thinker is a critical thinker; the informed citizen is a critical citizen who can evaluate argument and make judgements on the basis of rational discourse, understanding that all discourse is provisional, contestable, and open to re-evaluation. Thus, Bruner (1974) argued,

> Pedagogical theory … is not only technical but cultural, ideological and political. If it is to have its impact, it must be self-consciously all of these (pp.122).

Yet we should avoid the self-deception that as educators we are the guardians of democracy and that we in some sense stand outside the contested character of knowledge and the educational values within which knowledge is embedded. The place of education in any society and the competing pedagogies through which particular outcomes are pursued are constituents in the history and contestation of democracy. Education systems are contextualised by their histories and the struggles that have formed and shaped their role, but they are also given meaning by their futures and the aspirations that we have for the kind of society that we want to achieve. In the modern world, education systems are central to the contestation of political and social values. Educators, as citizens, are participants in those struggles.

In this process the meaning of democracy is emergent and evolving. As educators we are participants in its construction but also in its demise. Pedagogy is political in the sense that it may be democratic, reflective, critical, participatory, tolerant and non-hierarchical, or it may be authoritarian, based upon received conceptualisations of meaning, uncritical applications of knowledge, certainty about 'standards' and, belief in competencies as the measure of the 'good' citizen. But education cannot be defined in terms of an unremitting pursuit of ideological interests. That is a contradiction. The only sense in which it is meaningful to talk about education, as distinct from the stagnation of ideological certainty, is as a critical stance in relation to the 'truth'.

What is Schooling For?

The crisis of purpose in education is a worldwide crisis, but it also reflects a wider process of redefinition of the character and role of the state. The neo-liberal critique of education claims that traditional, state controlled systems have lacked both the flexibility and the will to respond imaginatively to the challenges of the new times in which we live. Education systems are seen as part of the bureaucracy of post-war welfare idealism gone wrong; one element in an egalitarian utopia that has atrophied on the one hand into a dependency creating system of pity and on the other hand into a system that stifles opportunity and initiative by the imposition of mediocrity. It is argued that public education no longer demonstrates 'fitness for purpose' because the purpose towards which it directs its energies is located in a world that no longer exists and is based on an ideology that is no longer relevant. What so animates neo-liberal politicians is their belief that the education system is holding society back whilst unproductively consuming considerable, potentially wealth creating, resources.

Of course this is in itself an ideological standpoint in so far as those who put forward the argument are rarely willing to enter into any reflective self-critique of their own position, but perhaps this is the nature of politics rather than of any particular political viewpoint. What the present debates and critiques of education do illustrate are the powerful ways in which education and politics are connected. But, equally, as educators it is surely our role to subject all argument and opinion to critique, wherever on the political spectrum those arguments come from.

The modern discourses of 'accountability' of 'standards' of 'choice and diversity', are central both to the reconceptualisation of purpose in education and to the reconstitution of the teaching profession. Terms like 'accountability' and 'standards' are bandied about as if they have just been discovered, but in truth it is not their discovery that is new but the meaning that is ascribed to them. What we are witnessing is, in part, an attempt to reign in what is seen as a burgeoning state bureaucracy. It is about a dis-investment in the state; a refusal to see the role of the

state as being to provide educational opportunities and support as a right. This reflects a belief in self-help as well as a belief that the state is a self-reproducing bureaucracy that diverts resources from the creative and wealth-producing sectors of society into systems of administration and welfare support that reinforce the dependency of the poor on those same bureaucracies. For neo-liberals this is not simply a commitment to the interests of the rich over the poor. Nor does it entail a lack of interest in the poor. It follows, instead, from the view that the position of the less advantaged is best improved by giving more entrepreneurial members of society the freedom to generate wealth which necessarily, through increased employment opportunities, will filter down to the less well off. The second strand to the neo-liberal argument, however, is that in breaking the dependency of low-income groups on welfare they too will become more entrepreneurial and wealth generating members of society. What stands in the way of this goal is the state itself, or at least that element of the state bureaucracy that works against the interests of the market.

Yet this does not imply the withering away of the state, *apropos* a parody of Marx's well-known vision of a communist future. The state, in fact, retains considerable power and authority within the neo-liberal world. As Andrew Gamble (1988) has argued, what characterises modern government is the project of creating a free economy and a strong state. In other words, minimalist state involvement in the social sphere contrasting with a strengthening of the capacity of the state within the parameters of the authority that it continues to assert. This is evident in arenas of international affairs and internal security. Paradoxically, the power of the state is also evident within those very domains, such as education, that it attacks for their interference with the freedom of the market. In this respect the authority of the state is used to reduce the influence of those groups who stand outside the neo-liberal project – trade unions, teacher organisations, political opponents. This is the framework within which current struggles between Commonwealth and State governments in Australia should be understood. In significant part, it concerns a struggle for political legitimacy. But this should not be read as State governments championing the interests of democracy and the community over those of the free market with the latter being empowered by the federal government. The reality is inevitably more complex, not least because State governments also are engaged in strengthening their own capacity to govern, partly in response to federal challenges to their authority but also because of the internal dynamics of governance in a rapidly deregulating world.

The centralisation of power within the state apparatus increasingly involves the state in the regulation of its institutions and agencies whilst at the same time deregulating the context within which they operate. Diversity of provision is encouraged, private schools are advantaged over public schools, universities are deregulated and forced

into self-privatisation in the face of funding cuts and moves towards a free market for providers. Simultaneously the state (both federal and local) is busily micro-managing the declining public sector. Schools face greater regulation and control over what can be taught and how. Likewise, universities are shackled by the interference of government in their operations.

At the heart of these processes is a reconstitution of professional identities. The rise and constitution of public sector professionalism is inextricably linked to the growth of the modern state and the ambition to use the state as a mechanism both for the maintenance of social order and in engineering social change. What characterises public sector professionals is their relationship to the state rather than to those 'clients' with whom they work. The state mediates the relationship between professional and client, determining both the nature and quality of services to be offered and defining the client group and the relationship between professional and client. For example in the field of social work, it is the state that determines categories of children deemed to be 'at risk' and the procedures to be followed in the protection of those children. The professional is not completely disempowered within this system but the role is framed externally and the professional is ultimately accountable to the state. In this sense the state may be identified as the real client in that the professional stands between the state and the recipient of services and does so in the role of agent of the state (Armstrong 1995). In significant ways the two clients that professionals serve are potentially in contradiction. Within the framework of control that manages professional life and decision-making the individual social worker and teacher may pursue outcomes that are central to an understanding of their role in community and personal empowerment, democratic participation and equal opportunities. Likewise, schools operate in a contested and contradictory context that reflects the uneasy political dynamics that have underpinned the growth of the state.

Schools have traditionally reproduced inequalities and hierarchies. Yet schooling has also expanded economic opportunities for subordinate groups and contributed to the extension of democratic rights. Similarly, whilst within the ideology of the welfare state social work has been centrally concerned with the management of troublesome populations it has also contributed to processes of self and community empowerment that have questioned the underlying structures of inequality and the operation of power within society. These contradictions lie at the centre of professional identities both in education and social work and it is important to understand attempts by politicians and other dominant interest groups to reconfigure professional education as a non-critical and technical project for what it is; that is, the routinisation and depoliticisation of practices that legitimate and institutionalise dominant beliefs and values; a process that both undermines critical thinking as a democratic educational and social practice.

Professional Education as Democratic Practice

The challenges for those of us involved in professional education, both as teachers and students are immense. One of the biggest challenges facing us is that of developing a democratic practice based upon a critical questioning of the contested social and political interests that inform educational policy and practice. To be critical is to take risks; it entails asking questions about whose interests are served by particular ways of conceptualising educational value and practice.

As Milan Kundera (1996) in his magnificent novel 'The Book of Laughter and Forgetting' so eloquently put it 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. We fully understand the past through our actions in the present and the future as we engage pedagogically with both hope and power to remake the world. To ask questions and to explore how, as a community of participation and of dissent, we might help each other, and those wider communities with whom we work, requires the existence or the creation of an intellectual space for dialogue about what it is that we do. To ask questions rather than to accept received wisdom is dangerous as educators such as Socrates, Rousseau, Dewey, Raymond Williams, Paulo Freire, as well as countless lesser known teachers and educators in our schools, colleges and universities have discovered, sometimes to their cost. And there are the traditional lessons of respect and good behaviour towards those we share this planet with; a message from the Aboriginal tradition that so often is swept away by the 'new' 'dog eat dog' standards of self interest that some would have us believe are the educational values of the modern world. But that questioning about what the powerful would have us believe, must, I would argue, be at the heart of any aspirations we have towards a democratic society. This means that as educators, in whatever area of practice we work, we are confronted daily by the dilemma inherent in the contradictory character of education in a society where beliefs and values are contested but also stand in relation to each other as social interests embedded in the structures of power and control. To question the institutionalisation of dominant ideas as scientific knowledge derived from the application of scientific method is to conceptualise the educational process as democratic but also to place those engaged in this work in a highly political realm. This is not to say that our own practice as professional educators and researchers is political in an ideological sense. Quite the reverse: it would be equally anti-democratic to focus our approach to professional education simply in opposition to dominant ideas. However, as Kundera (1996) again maintains

> Whoever wishes to remember must not stay in one place, waiting for the memories to come of their own accord! Memories are scattered all over the immense world, and it takes voyaging to find them and make them leave their refuge! (p.229)

The point is that education as a democratic activity involves critical dialogue with all ideas, practices and structures. Antonia Darder (2002, p.93) has referred to this as a creative and often intuitive process that 'helps teachers discover new ways of being with their students in the classroom and new ways of introducing experiences that can effectively assist students to connect more deeply with their own critical capacities, in order to explore the world and understand themselves more fully'. In professional education, as with all education, this requires that the skills of dialogue be placed at the centre of the learning process.

Paulo Freire believed that intuition and dreaming are necessary elements of a pedagogy committed to critical human development. Freire's beliefs were closely interwoven with those of the indigenous people of his own country, Brazil, and have synergies with the traditions of the aboriginal peoples of Australia. We shape our world in communion with our history. This approach to pedagogy is not something unfamiliar to teachers. Teaching is after all a creative art. Its success depends upon the creation of a learning context in which there is synergy between those mutually engaged in the processes of learning and teaching which connects with the experiences brought to the learning encounter by all those involved. To define teaching simply in terms of the transmission of knowledge is to be uncritical about what and how knowledge is constituted as a social and political stance towards the truth. It is also to disembody learning from the processes of human dialogue, both in the present and with the past. Learning always involves a revisiting and a reconstitution of the truth through critical dialogue. Teaching strategies are most effective when they arise from the critical capacity of teachers to listen to their students and engage actively with the process of learning. The creativity of teaching lies in this constant critical interaction with the learner in the interrogation of truth and the exploration of what Raymond Williams (1989) called 'the possibilities of common life'.

Participation and dissent are central to democratic life and to the education of professionals whose roles are intricately concerned with the possibilities of common life. For educators these possibilities are revealed through dialogue with our students and in dialogues with the communities of policy and practice with whom we work. They centre upon an exploration of the relationship between everyday experiences and attempts to build our understanding of the world and of our practice through dialogical reflection and critical generalisations. We cannot simply be concerned with the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and competencies; it is our duty to interrogate what is meant by knowledge and how it is formed and to understand the limits of competency. As educators we are engaged in a process of human inquiry that makes us human. As Freire (1998) argued:

> For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (p.68).

It is by dreaming this future that as educators, researchers and professionals we can begin to understand our responsibilities and through the questioning of truth recognise our lives as unfinished.

Endnote

[1] This article was first delivered as a keynote paper presented to the postgraduate research forum in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney organised by the Faculty's Postgraduate Education and Social Work Student Association (PESSA) on the 8th June 2005.

References

Armstrong, D. (1995) *Power and Partnership in Education*, Routledge, London.

Bruner, J. (1974) *Relevance of Education*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.

Carnoy, M. and H.M. Levin (1985) *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Carr, W. and A. Hartnett (2005) *Education and the Struggle for Democracy: The politics of educational ideas*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

Dale, R. (1989) *The State and Education Policy*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes.

Darder, A. (2002) *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A pedagogy of love*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.

Dewey, J. and E. Dewey (undated) *Schools of To-morrow*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London.

Freire, A.M.A. and D. Macedo, eds. (1998) *The Paulo Freire Reader*, Continuum, New York.

Gamble, A. (1988) *The Free Economy and the Strong State*, Macmillan, London.

Giroux, H. A. (1981) *Ideology, Culture and the Process of Schooling*, Falmer Press, London.

Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence), Polity Press, Cambridge.

Kundera, M. (1996) *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, (translated by Aaron Asher), Faber and Faber, London.

Mills, C.W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*, Penguin, London.

Williams, R. (1989) *Resources of Hope: Culture, democracy and socialism*, Verso, London.

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour*, Saxon House, Westmead.