

# Where is our moral compass? The importance of ethical enquiry in our search for 'new directions' in education

ANN RYAN

Monash University

## Abstract

*The fundamental objective of ethical inquiry is for student to think about not just what, but also how and why particular narrative frameworks come to dominate our society. This paper discusses the mis-educative practices that are perpetuated in classrooms, under increasing pressure from political and economic priorities. It briefly looks at both Freire's critical pedagogy and Dewey's notion of educative experience to understand how we might ethically respond to these practices.*

## Describing a dominant narrative framework

“To make moral judgements one must see oneself in a narrative framework – to ask what one ought to do is to ask what kind of story one is apart of” (McIntyre, 1981). In this paper I discuss how, as a teacher educator, I might describe my own ethical story within the narrative framework that has come to dominate my world.

I read with dismay in the newspaper the other day, a story about a duo of thugs who ran amok through an inner city suburb of Melbourne, assaulting and abusing any one who was not of their race. Last year the newspapers were reporting a story of the same ugly face of ignorance and hatred, laid bare in the Cronulla riots in Sydney. The riots had their roots in the marginalisation of, and discrimination against, a particular ethnic group that suffers high youth unemployment along with feelings of disenfranchisement. The Australian Prime Minister refused to denounce the attacks in Cronulla as being racially motivated.

No longer on the front pages, but serialised towards the back of the daily paper among world news stories, the tragedy of the war in Iraq continues to unfold, describing one horror story after another of death and destruction. The Prime Ministers agreement with America to involve Australian forces in this so called 'war on terror' is supported by a government that seemingly values resources over human lives.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, represents the forceful and dominant official story of Australia, and when he does, he looks and sounds like an ordinary bloke. Hugh Mackay, an Australian social researcher says that “Howard acts like one of us. His personal standards are no higher than ours. Although we might yearn for visionary and charismatic leaders, there is something peculiarly reassuring about a bloke in whom we recognise our frailties, weaknesses and contradictions” (Mackay 2005).

The narrative framework represented in the stories above describes a world of neo-liberal values that underpin the imperatives of the global market. It is a world where fear of difference is cultivated within an economic philosophy that preaches that ruthless competition between individuals will benefit us all. The narrative framework describes a society frightened of the new and of any challenges to the status quo. “Howard sets our sights on a lower lesser target. Far from inspiring nobility of purpose he encourages us to be comfortable with some of the baser aspects of our own ordinariness. He reinforces our materialism” (Mackay 2005).

The systematic corporatisation of the Australian culture rewards conservative conformity and encourages passivity by keeping us engaged in 'busy work'. We are constantly stimulated by things that don't matter, distracted by diversions of insignificance and paternalistic assurances that everything is under control. This conservative corporatisation is seen in our education institutions where schools and universities are judged by their ability to efficiently churn out products for the economic machine. Learning is at the service of

government, political power and the economy; overseen by positivist models that impose micro-managerial procedures and increasing amounts of bureaucratic form filling. The vested interests of the educational establishment such as tutoring services, study skills businesses, text book writers and curriculum resource developers provide support for the whole enterprise.

For example, a number of schools in my area have been told to purchase and use a literacy curriculum package in the form of a DVD. Primary students sit passively in their organised rows; feet flat on the ground, back straight, eyes to the front, as information is delivered to them by a talking figure on the screen. The teacher is not involved, but rather sits to the side perhaps reading the newspaper, as in one instance observed, or, as in another instance, moving between the rows, eraser in hand, rubbing out work that was not considered to be neat enough. Groups of young minds sit immobile for as long 45 minutes while each lesson is played through. There is a workbook to be filled in with the correct responses.

In a second example the Australian Academy of Science has produced a science curriculum package for use in primary schools, funded by the Federal government. To facilitate correct use of this package training workshops are offered to instruct educators on how to present the material. It has been designed for use in schools in all states of Australia presumably on the assumption that a nationally prescribed curriculum is on the way.

These examples, along with various bodies being established to monitor teacher adherence to standards and predetermined outcomes, represent the growing empirical focus becoming more prevalent in the expectations of teacher work. However, empirical evidence provides little in the way of helping us to decide how we should act or what we should value in our work as educators. Paulo Freire (1998) argues that “education never was, is not, and never can be neutral or indifferent in regard to the reproduction of the dominant ideology or the interrogation of it” (p. 91). From this perspective we need to understand the nature of how our work in education is being framed and in so doing understand how we as human persons can nurture our unique, vulnerable and personal selves in relation to others and the world we live in.

### **Ideology and matters of hidden curriculum**

Within the dominant Australian narrative framework, the move toward centralised curriculum design is becoming increasingly insistent, and not only in the primary and secondary sectors. Currently in the education faculty of my university there is a process of developing courses that does not support individual research agendas and the rich diversity that they represent. Rather these courses are being described within the economic rationalist agenda that supports the status quo and thus the dominant narrative framework. For this reason I argue that it is important for educators and their students to understand the context specific nature of curriculum and the way in which it represents the ideology of the dominant culture. In this paper I understand ideology to mean the ontological position that describes particular values, attitudes and meanings through which the world is being described. It arises out of the collective experience of the culture in which it was constructed. From this perspective, ideology determines what counts as knowledge. In an environment that supports the economic domination of curriculum matters, high status knowledge is linked to factors useful to the economy and more particularly job training. Schools and universities process knowledge in particular ways to help to sort this out.

How education institutions do this and how it is related to matters of power and control and access to resources is determined by government policy. Stephen Kemis (1990) argued that “policy is increasingly replacing educational theory as a source of guidance for practitioners, that is, education is no longer discussed in broad visions and ideals but in terms of what governments (or their ‘advisors’) believe to be possible and often expedient” (in Taylor et al., 1997, p. 3). This situation is a matter of concern for a number of reasons. Firstly, by failing to recognise the ideological nature of curriculum, there may be a tendency to accept the knowledge presented as reflecting an understanding of the world that express the reality, rather than just one way of making sense of it. The curriculum becomes authoritarian, certain and uncritical of

knowledge. It therefore negates the need for students to value curiosity and wondering about their world, or the desire to listen to a range of different points of view.

Secondly I would argue that the current climate in education is an example of Emile Durkheim's (1976) notion that education is not about questioning the structures of society but rather learning to conform to them; that education is about the socialising of an individual to understand and accept his or her place in society. As a result we find that curriculum is constructed for essential reasons rather than on social understandings. We see primary schools devoting more than half of their time to literacy and numeracy at the expense of art and music for example. Eventually, 'clever' students go to university and the less clever are weeded out by the system to take up more menial jobs. This understanding of curriculum validates the power of the dominant powerbrokers and serves to undermine the professional knowledge and skills of teachers to that of a value free, technical activity.

Henry Giroux (1981) describes the assumption of any superiority of educational or academic knowledge over everyday commonsense knowledge as a 'hidden curriculum'. It is hidden "in order to be silent about the underlying politics and interests in which they are grounded" (p. 154). Hidden curriculum is not part of the explicit intention outlined in curriculum documents and support materials, but rather represents the implicit messages students receive, often unconsciously, from such things as the organisational structures of educational institutions and attitudes of the teachers. "Hidden curriculum is the product of the relationship between teachers and students that are developed and reinforced by the school as an ideological agency for the state, for the purposes of social control and the various rituals and practices established within this institution in order to fulfil the purpose" (Smith and Lovat 2003, p. 37).

Many of the messages of hidden curriculum are concerned with power, authority, access and participation. Associated assessment regimes serve to provide a sorting device to reproduce inequalities that are inherent in the capitalist marketing system. Children learn a great deal from the hidden curriculum. Dewey calls this "collateral learning" and suggests that it has far reaching effects on the lives of our children. "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that the person learns only the particular thing he is learning at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes of likes and dislikes, may be and often is much more important than spelling lessons or lesson in geography or history that is learned. For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future" (Dewey, 1938, p. 48).

If we as educators do not set out to help students to become aware of issues of hidden curriculum, then we are making the choice to be indifferent to the dominant ideology of the consumer culture "that reduces the social relations in all cultural settings, including education, to the exchange relations of the marketplace" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 3). We would be deceiving ourselves if we allow ourselves to let pass, without comment, the slick marketing strategies that have taken hold in our institutions. We would run the risk of becoming little more than purveyors of 'objective' knowledge stripped of any intellectual or cultural meaning.

### **What one ought to do**

As a teacher educator I find myself at odds with current trends in the neoliberal ideas of education and concerned about the popular notion within the community of teaching as a non skilled job. The constant use of the term 'teacher training' rather than 'teacher education' exemplifies this as a less than subtle government push undermines the professionalism of teachers. It is clear why this is the case, says Armstrong (2007) as "a non professional teaching force is a compliant and easily managed workforce. Diminishing the knowledge and skill of teachers provides a rationale for paying teachers less, for providing them with less than adequate working conditions and for holding them in a politically subservient position". To challenge this we need a highly professional education system with teachers confident in their subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills, not technical assistants in the promotion of hidden curriculum.

Asking what one ought to do is to begin to frame questions that provide an important focus for the human activity of educative practice. It is also to ask questions about how we ought to live. Central to the task of exploring ethical questions are our values – the attitudes, understandings and beliefs we see as important for shaping our world view and our ethical perspective. It guides us in our quest for what constitutes practice of educative value, and what, as Dewey asks, is worthy of the name education. He argued that education is an abstract term and therefore it has no aims or purposes of its own (Dewey 1935, p. 114). We cannot attribute an educative value to something that is abstract. From this standpoint it is persons, within a narrative framework, who have aims and purposes, and it is these which are understood to have value. It is these values then that we must examine to determine whether they are good for attaining worthwhile ends. R.S. Peters has said that “engaging with the ‘aims of education’ is a way of getting people to get clear about and focus their attention on what is worthwhile achieving” (Peters 1970, p. 28). For Peters it is the manner rather than the matter that is to provide an important criterion for judging the educative value of an experience.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy Freire (1998) argues that the teacher is obliged to engage in an exploration and examination of the economic social and political conditions that influence the educational process. From this position we can begin to make judgements that contribute to living better lives. Freire in his work in educating for social justice emphasised the importance of not only theoretical understandings of education but also the importance of recognising the reality of our daily lives in the cultural and political contexts that frame them. Freire saw the dangers associated with the global development of widespread uncritical acceptance of neo-liberal beliefs and practices, and worked to think about and share knowledge of how we exist in the world. In the discourse of critical pedagogy, “to be living in a dream world is to be unaware of the everyday conditions that have been produced by oppressive systems of hegemony, such as capitalism” (Allen, 2002, p. 108). It is a pedagogy that supports critical thinking, along with the synthesising and trying out of ideas based on our own experiences. We must therefore interrogate the curriculum and identify the underlying values being promoted, for it is morality that has to do with reasoning and how we behave according to the values we hold. These values go beyond our own self interest and guide us when we make a personal decision on where we stand in relation to these values. Critical pedagogy moves beyond matters of how we think to be concerned with what we ought to think. It is about being a reasonable person, someone who will allow themselves to be reasoned with and being able to arrive at decisions on which they are prepared to act.

### **Moral Imaginings**

Heidegger (1927) suggested that care is a prerequisite to reasonableness. Caring, he says, is what happens in and to the world and is a necessary prerequisite of any kind of serious inquiry (p. 227). He is referring to a caring that is concerned with how we interact with one another and respect for the processes of inquiry. Nel Noddings is referring to this notion of care when she says that: “We are not purveyors of objective facts as . . . educators; we touch our students’ hearts by the manner in which we address them or oppose their beliefs” (Noddings, 1993: 7). Caring, along with empathy are both important in our ethical enquiry and how we make our decisions regarding the way in which we want to live our lives.

It is important to me in my work as a teacher educator to scrutinise the way in which the status quo of current education practice is protected and promoted by the dominant power structures of neo-liberal interests, to expose the challenge they represent to educative practices for what it is: a bureaucratisation and de-politicisation of professional practices that undermines critical thinking and democratic values. To not do so, to not engage students in processes of ethical enquiry, dialogue and critical thinking is to engage in mis-educative practice. “What is distinctive of personhood is the consciousness not only another as persons but of oneself - a sense of one’s own unity as a person, one’s own value and dignity, one’s own capacity to think

through a problem, to persevere when things get tough, to establish a platform of values and beliefs whereby one can exercise some control over one's own destiny" (Pring quoted by Best, 1996, p. 4).

The ethical strategy of moral imagination involves asking oneself What kind of world do I want to live in? What story do I want to be a part of? What would be the consequences of acting in this way? The narrative framework described at the beginning of this paper cannot be allowed to dominate and dehumanise our own ethical stories. "It is becoming simultaneously clear that human existence is, in fact, a radical and profound tension between good and evil, between dignity and indignity, between decency and indecency, between the beauty and the ugliness of the world" (Freire, 1998, p. 53). There are two sides of our human condition that an educated person will require coming to terms with; our ability to visit terrible suffering and destruction on our fellow human beings and our curiosity and insatiable need to know and understand our world. Sartre said that educators who refuse to transform the ugliness of human misery, social injustices and inequalities invariably become educators who "will change nothing and will serve no one, but will succeed only in finding moral comfort in malaise"(in Memmi 1965 pp xxiv-xxv).

To discover and make visible the falsehoods that deceive us we must understand our own hopes and dreams, interests and values. In so doing learn to be responsible to ourselves and not be dependent on others for being told what to think or what to do. To be independent minded is something I would ask of my students as they embark on their careers in the teaching profession. In this sense they would be free and able to make their own decisions upon reflection on their own experiences and their own situation in the world. It is an ethical responsibility.

## References

- Allen, R (2002) Wake up Neo: White identity, hegemony and consciousness in the Matrix, in: J Slater, S Fain, C. Rossatto (eds.), *The Freirean Legacy* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing).
- Armstrong, D. (2007) Dreaming our Future: developing democratic professional practice? *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 33:3, pp. 1-11.
- Best, J. (1996) *Education, Spirituality and the whole child*.
- Claydon, L., Knight, T., Dado, M. (1977) *Curriculum and Culture* (Hornsby, NSW: Allen & Unwin).
- Dewey, J. (1938) *Education and Experience* (New York: Touchstone).
- Dewey, J. (1935) *Theory of a moral life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1960).
- Durkheim, E. (1976) *The elementary forms of the religious life*, 2nd edition (London: Allen & Unwin).
- Freire, P. (1998) *Pedagogy of Freedom ethics democracy and civic courage* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.).
- Giroux, H. (1981) *Ideology and culture and the process of schooling* (London: Falmer).
- Heidegger, M. (1927) *Being and Time*.
- Kemmis, Stephen (1997) Curriculum Contestation and Change, in: Sandra Taylor (ed.), *Fazal*.
- Rizvi, Bob Lingard and Miriam Henry (xxxx) *Education policy and the politics of change* (London: Routledge).
- MacIntyre, A (1981) *After Virtue study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth).
- Mackay, H. (2005) Howard: an ordinary bloke who feeds a nation's prejudices, *The Age*, Melbourne, 21 February.
- Memmi, A (1965) *Introduction to the coloniser and the colonised* (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Noddings, N (1993) *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (USA: Teacher College Press).
- Peters, R. (1970) *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen & Unwin).
- Smith, D. & Lovat, T. (2003) *Curriculum Action on Reflection*, 4th edition (NSW: Social Science Press).