**Social Justice through critical pedagogies in Literacy on an Initial Teacher Education Course.**

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**Abstract**

According to Giroux (2014) the role of education should be to promote collective responsibility for social problems and to promote social justice. He suggests however that any previous purpose of education, related to social justice, is being eroded by the onslaught of neoliberal agendas across the world the outcome of which, he suggests, is the deconstruction of the radical and critical imagination. This paper will argue that there is an imperative on teacher educators to resist the erosion of critical thinking through their commitment to a continued emphasis on pedagogical approaches within their institutions that encourage critical reflection at every juncture. This is particularly important in areas of social justice where teacher educators can have an influential impact on how the next generation of teachers think about social issues like migration and the impact that these processes have on their classrooms and the pupils within them. The paper will explore some ‘close up’ research undertaken with a group of year two initial teacher education students concerning the concept of resilience and how this often referred to, desirable teacher competency can be used subversively to arm trainee teachers against the pressures of particular ways of thinking emerging from neoliberal agendas. It explores the use of children’s literature texts as a focus for critical thinking on a core English module that includes a focus on ethnicity and issues of social justice. It explores particularly the use of two key texts Armin Greder’s *The Island* and the Australian book by Shaun Tan titled *The Arrival.*

In recent years the impact of neoliberal political agendas, have been felt acutely in higher education institutions across the world, including within my own. In the field of education these agendas include a number of elements one of which is the ascendance of competency based initiatives, which may according to Morley and Dunstan (2013), undermine more sophisticated approaches to theorised practice. The writers go on to explain that there emerges under the currently pervading, economics based regime, a problematic separation of academia and the fields of professional practice. This is due to the influence of neoliberalism, resulting in the promotion of individualisation, and a negating of very complex and often problematic social issues, with responsibility for these problems in society increasingly attributed to an ever growing number of demonised groups (Tyler 2013).

The impact of neoliberalism on professions like teaching and social work have been researched by a number of authors including Baines (2006), who looked at the undermining of professionalism in Australia, and Wallace and Pease (2011) who looked at the possibilities for resistance to these agendas by social workers. Singh and Cowden (2009) on the other hand called on professional groups to retain their intellectual integrity and maintain critical positions thus protecting their emancipatory role within times of social change. Competence based approaches like those mentioned above emerged in higher education because of the alleged disconnection between what is taught in universities, and what was needed by the labour market (Malone and Supri 2012). The rationale for competences was underpinned by a belief that the application of knowledge to practice was imperative, and the knowledge based economy would thrive as a result of this dynamic, with the Bologna declaration in 1999 reinforcing this with a plea for universities to teach competences rather than merely teaching knowledge (Procee 2011). In the case of primary teaching, competences are formalised in the form of teaching standards which are a mix of specific skills and knowledge and a set of dispositions or habitus (Bourdieu 1990). These standards guide the work of both trainee, and qualified teachers and they are considered and assessed at various stages of a teacher’s career. They are measurable through a process often accompanied by the application of ‘grading’ particularly during the training period whilst students are at university. Grading profiles are commonly used whilst student teachers are on placements, allegedly indicating the student teacher’s professional abilities in terms of their capacity to be ‘outstanding’. With this increasingly outcome based approach Morley and Dunstan (2013) suggest that managerial type goals are emerging, like those represented by competence based approaches, which are then undermining the integrity of academic and professional programmes. They suggest, drawing on the work of for example Loftus et al (2011), that what we are losing in these new approaches, is the benefits of wider, more subjective viewpoints which are often transformative and in addition would commonly challenge world views related to social justice and democracy.

As well as competency based approaches in teacher training courses other agendas have emerged related to the knowledge economy. The concept of resilience has gained recent recognition, as the complexity of the needs of schools and learners increase (White and Smith 2005). Despite its prevalence in educational discourses, resilience is defined differently by different researchers, but Gu and Day (2007) suggest two main trends in this area. The first of these purports resilience is a psychological construct and the second constructs resilience as a multidimensional and complex process, operating within a social system of interrelated aspects. Both of these defining approaches have aspects to offer, revealing the impact of issues of self esteem and self efficacy and their impact on an individual’s level of resilience and in addition highlighting structural inhibitors that may affect an individual’s ability to cope with adversity at a particular time. Work by Brunetti in 2006 touched upon the idea of the ‘heart’ of individual teachers and how this key aspect of their subjectivity equipped them with the resilience needed to work towards and for issues of social justice. This paper whilst acknowledging the excellent work by researchers in the field of resilience seeks to look at resilience in a different way, as a more agentic concept.

This paper seeks to link resilience more with an individual’s ability to maintain a strong professional and personal identity despite the continual onslaught of government policy, curriculum change and pedagogic dictats. An understanding of teachers’ emotional and cognitive selves is important in giving us an insight into their work and effectiveness, especially when their individual values may clash with structural inhibitors or policies (Archer 2000).Cooley as early as 1902 suggested that we have a looking glass self whereby our subjectivity is influenced by the perceptions of others, and more contemporary work emphasises the importance of the understanding of self to beliefs, attitudes and ultimately actions. These works although a hundred years apart suggest that there are interrelationships between personal and professional identities. In 1989 Nias characterised a teacher’s professional context as characterised by isolation and reliant on personal resources. In more recent research on teacher identities Cooper and Olson (1996) suggest that in pre-service teachers the self is not yet substantive and therefore is an ever changing entity. A fundamental problem for teacher identity is according to Day et al (2006) that their identities lie in the tensions between their learned models of the world and their knowledge of the diversity of the children they encounter.

Given that student teachers’ identities are not yet fully formed it leaves the possibility for initial teacher education courses to have a positive influence both on attitudes and understanding. One relatively recent government policy has been the requirement of schools to engage with the government’s Prevent agenda, this being one part of CONTEST, Britain’s overarching counterterrorism policy. Prevent is an attempt to deal with the radicalisation of young people and involves the delegation of recognition of vulnerable individuals to schools and other professional groups. The prevent agenda rests upon a specific set of assumptions and arguments from particular mainstream traditions (Coppock and McGovern 2014). Prevent’s main aim is to eradicate radicalisation and stop individuals from becoming terrorists. It is clear from recent research however that the Prevent agenda is far from straightforward and as some suggest may rest on an ideology of a particular social science paradigm that purports the psychologisation of social problems (Moghaddam 2005, and Furedi 2003). Considering the problematic nature of prevent and the teaching standard that requires teachers to uphold British values it seems sensible to equip students with a strong set of personal values whilst at university that may allow them to understand the requirements of them in a critical rather than passive way.

From experience of teaching in an HE environment for the last eleven years it is clear that there can be a form of resilience that emerges when critical reflection is coupled with explicit teaching about social justice issues. The resilience that emanates from this approach comes in response to continual encouragement to examine issues of pedagogy and practice from multiple and more essentially critical perspectives. These practices arguably lead to student teachers having to position themselves in terms of how they feel about specific ideas and ideologies and then begin to recognise the multiple perspectives that can be applied, and from this starting point embark on solidifying their own responses to these different viewpoints. From this process they build not only an understanding of the identities of others but also begin to understand their own identity and how it has shaped their values. By initiating dialogic, but critical practices in universities we can challenge the culture of limited learning that emerges from competence based approaches. Critical reflection like that advocated by Fook and Gardner (2007) coupled with critical pedagogy in line with that proposed by Giroux (2011) can have an enlightening effect on thinking and behaviours.

A desirable outcome of this work on identity and values would be the development of ‘cosmopolitan’ learning coupled with a form of personal and intellectual resilience that prevents the passive acceptance of problematic ideologies, and is replaced instead, with a critical yet open mindset. Cosmopolitanism has gained credence in recent years but has a long history, as Nussbaum (1996) noted, the ancient Greek philosophers had a propensity for the acceptance of a globally interrelated moral order. She notes the ability of the Stoic philosophers to combine local affiliations with international sensibilities, resulting in an intensely moral stance that may have prevented cultural conflicts at that time. Kleingeld (1999) noted the multiple ways in which cosmopolitanism has been both constructed and contested over time and that its different versions are grounded in different accounts of the ways in which parts of the world are interconnected (Rizvi 2009). It is clear that the form of cosmopolitanism accepted at a particular point is dependent on the global connectivity of the time and in the case of now, the presence of technology, and the apparent close proximity of the global and the local are very significant. As Rizvi (2009) notes the nature of contemporary connectivity differs markedly from that of the past and according to Albrow (1991) the peoples of the world are now incorporated into a single global society. Tomlinson (2002) suggests that what is emerging in the present day is complex connectivity that incorporates the idea of an ever densening of networks. Perhaps the most relevant work to understanding the current issues of glocalisation (Robertson 2010) is that of Stuart Hall. He suggests that the world is not segmented into well bounded organic communities, but is much more complex than that with groups though culturally marked not entirely separated from each other. Hall (2002) suggests that the most appropriate response at this time is a form of cosmopolitanism called vernacular cosmopolitanism which understands the need for local and national attachments remaining, whilst also opening up to the world view of others who do not share these. Appiah (2006) suggests that this form of cosmopolitanism allows engagement with other societies without approving of or adopting them.

The ‘close up’ research undertaken for this paper involves the analysis of the responses to pedagogy undertaken on a core English module. The module is taught to cohorts of undergraduate teaching students of approximately ninety students each year. The module has various pedagogical aims, largely related to the development of subject knowledge in English but also leaves spaces for the exploration of children’s literature texts as a means of teaching reading and writing as well as, vitally, speaking and listening skills. Although the focus of the module is English there is capacity for the exploration of social justice issues and how ideologies may be presented to even young children through the media as well as through written texts. The aim of exploring these texts is twofold to disturb the expectations of students about what texts they may choose to teach with in schools, and their responsibilities when choosing them in terms of social justice. The module introduces them to critical pedagogies that will take them way beyond the limitations of guided and shared reading conventions that they are likely to encounter when they go in to schools and into the realms of ‘everyday cosmopolitanism.’ The second aim is to utilise the texts in ways that build resilience through the ability to think critically about them. As the issues in the texts are explored the students gain insights into other world views and build their capacity to resilient on occasions when they are only presented with a single viewpoint.

Although there are many texts used on the module it is often easier to use picture books as the whole book can be explored rather than merely an abstract as in the case when using a novel. McKenzie (2003) suggests that picture books, like the ones used in this research, can impact on how children understand the world around them. Nodelman in 1999 reminded us of the power of pictures in texts and how they convey information and the dynamics of how they may well influence how we feel about the things depicted there. The two books chosen for this research engage students in questions of identity, belonging and exclusion as well as cultural conflicts that may emerge with the proximity of different groups. These texts, students may well subsequently share with their own pupils later in classrooms using similar critical pedagogies. The intention of the sessions is to introduce them to what Britzman (1999) calls ‘difficult knowledge’ and how this can be used to challenge what may have become for them ‘lovely knowledge’ knowledge that is unquestioned and taken for granted. By teaching students using critical pedagogical approaches it is hoped that they will begin to interrogate the ideologies depicted in the texts they choose to use in schools, and start to recognise how readers may be being positioned in particular ways and led to see only selected views of the world.

The module lasts for usually twelve sessions and is largely taught using a range of pedagogies including drama. The pedagogical approaches are critical in nature and include techniques that may be considered as what Fairclough (2007) suggests is discourse analysis. The work of Foucault (1980) and Janks (2013) is drawn upon as they both suggest in different ways, that the analysis of any kind of discourse is an analysis of power, language or institutional practice. The ways of thinking that emerge from this kind of close analysis reveal the regimes of truth underlying them. Exploration of the texts elicits dominant discourses not only from the texts themselves, but they also often reveal the students’ own value systems and the origins of them. The module content is constructed in order to disrupt these often taken for granted assumptions about all kinds of issues but particularly around ethnicity and identity. What is hoped is that students will begin to recognise what might be described as the metaphysic of common humanity (Gaita 2013). This approach is built on the premise that presupposes that all cultural groups share a form of common humanity even if they share little else.

Armin Greder’s book the Island is both complex and challenging. It is the kind of book that would have been unlikely to be published initially in English. The book is a picture book and the language within it is not complex even if the ideas presented are. The text is accompanied by graphic pictures which add brevity to the written text. It deals with the complexity of immigration through the story of one man being washed on to the shore having reached an island on a raft. The characters in the book are figures of authority within the local community, the vicar, a teacher, a journalist the local publican. The discourses related throughout the text resonate with the current media coverage of migrants entering countries across the world particularly areas like Greece etc. The work with the book involves discussion about the text itself but perhaps more importantly the issues depicted within it. The discussion that emerges is challenging and there are difficult conversations about racism and what constitute shared values. The book is very shocking in some ways with the treatment of the man by the local community being brutal. The influence of the adults in the community on the attitudes of the children is also hard to accept. Nevertheless what comes from the discussion is some acknowledgement of a common humanity and the need for understanding difference and how fear of difference can become problematic when it influences people to act in specific ways towards some groups.

The second book explored for the purposes of this paper is Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival.*This book has no written text at all but is entirely made up of illustrations. The text explores one man’s experiences as he leaves his family and moves across the world. It charts his struggle as he tries to adjust. The text explores migration, identity, loss and many other themes associated with diaspora. The book is complex but this means it can therefore be used across a range of ages. The students find the texts challenging because there are many complex issues woven within it and it also relies on close engagement with the illustrations. The book although very different from Greder’s book does nonetheless challenge readers in similar ways in terms of how groups of people are treated during the migration process and both books challenge readers in very specific ways.

This paper has explored the notion of resilience and how it can be considered differently from the concept analysed into teachers and practice. This form of resilience is a way of strengthening student teachers’ sense of their own identity and how this might impact on them as teachers. Part of this resilience is the development of a critical mindset characterised though by an openness to a multiplicity of viewpoints relating to social justice issues. The activities are included within a core English module because English teaching as part of ITE courses is often characterised by the maintenance of subject knowledge areas like grammar and phonics, but not with exploring the powerful discourses that are carried by written texts and the power that students have to transform thinking with the texts that they choose. Given the changing demographics of British schools and pressures on teachers to act and think in particular ways it is imperative that HE providers stand firm in their resolution to maintain criticality throughout all that they do. In terms of learner gain a common measure of student progress it would seem that a cosmopolitan attitude is a desirable outcome for any student leaving university but particularly those who will go on to educate the next generation of global citizens.

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