

TEACHER EDUCATION AND ITS POLICIES IN AUSTRALIA: MAKING SPACE FOR A NEW URBAN EDUCATION PROJECT

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Over the past quarter of a century, teacher education has been the subject of numerous federal inquiries in Australia. Although the vast majority of the recommendations produced in these policy documents remain unimplemented (Dyson, 2003; Ramsey, 2000), reforms in other sectors of education have shaped the epistemological foundations of teacher education (Sachs & Groundwater-Smith, 1999). Because these reforms are not organized within a concerted vision or goal, the efforts of the many different stakeholders in education has led to contradictions between “teaching” and “learning to teach.” Furthermore, the discourses of schooling and teacher education continue to reproduce the divorce of practice and theory. The main claim of this paper is that the epicentral positioning of the major Australian cities normalises the experiences of teachers, including teacher educators, in urban settings. Accordingly, the concept and practice of “urbanity” needs to be interrogated, most particularly with respect to issues of inequality in educational provision, and the project of urban education needs to be re-examined in an Australian context.

This paper suggests some reasons why such an urban education project in Australia might inform current debates surrounding teacher education. It is organized into three major parts: (1) a story of education in Australia for thirty years from the middle of the twentieth century; (2) the notions of “urban” and “rural” as nationally constructed proxies for disadvantage; and, (3) the possibility of a new urban education project in Australia that informs and is informed by teacher education.

The first section provides a brief overview of the Australian education system from 1950 – 1980 as a way of introducing the larger historical context in which teacher education is situated. This is important for understanding how political agendas have shaped educational policy. The years following the 1980s will be explored in the third part of this paper with a focus on curriculum and teacher education policies.

Even though the vast majority of the population lives in urban locations, the discourse of urban education does not currently exist within Australia. In fact, since the beginning of teacher education, the only focus on urban education was a twenty year attempt initiated at La Trobe University more than three decades ago. The second part of this paper describes this collective, the Centre for the Study of Urban Education at La Trobe University, and more specifically, a project called the City Educational Taskforce. I explore why this has been the only initiative to study urban education, and offer an explanation of how the concept of “rurality,” rather than “urbanity,” is of particular significance to education in Australia.

This final part of the paper discusses how disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are currently at odds in programs of teacher education. Suggestions are offered for (re)imagining teacher education through a blurring of institutional boundaries. Reconnecting with the rationale of the City Educational Taskforce to suggest the importance of an Urban Education project along similar lines in Australia today, it also alludes to how research on the everyday experiences of schooling (Pierides, 2004) can inform our work as teacher educators and therefore the education of new teachers.

Education in Australia from the 1950s to the Early 1980s

Rapid demographic and political changes after World War II created a rich environment for research on education in urban settings in Australia. Around the middle of the twentieth century, Australia experienced “an enormous growth in the school population” (Turner, 1960, p. 135). In response to this growth, a number of reports were commissioned at the state and federal levels that eventually led to a more comprehensive education system. According to Connell (1993, p. 3), “in the quarter century from 1960 to 1985, Australian education experienced a change more sweeping and significant than that of any previous period in Australian history” (p. 3). Although he identifies the following four major trends during this period, it is debatable whether these were the only major trends during this period and to what extent these issues are still present in the current context of education.

1. The conscious and continual direction of educational policy and practice by economic, social, and political interests;
2. The reaffirmation of the relationship between education and culture;
3. The attempted conversion of instruction into education; and,
4. The rise of participatory decision-making for all levels of educational organisation (Connell, 1993, pp. 3-4).

The postwar era saw a decline in the number of people living in rural areas despite the overall population boom. The impact this had on the conception of urban education as distinct from rural education will be explored later in this paper. By the early 1960s, “approximately 80 per cent of the total population were in urban areas, 40 per cent being found in the two cities of Sydney and Melbourne” (Connell, 1993, p. 14). The teacher workforce was not prepared to teach the growing urban population. By the mid-1960s, almost half of all Australian teachers were under the age of 35, had not been graduated as teachers, and lacked classroom experience (Barcan, 1977). The late 1960s saw teachers, largely led by unions, institutes, and associations, pushing a number of issues ranging from teacher salaries, entrance qualifications, working conditions, compulsory transfers, non-professional duties, accommodation, study leave and shortages, to examinations, the curriculum and class sizes. The purposes of schooling were re-evaluated, and the changes in curriculum, pedagogy and philosophy had an impact on teacher education.

By the end of the 1960s, primary schools across Australia experienced more freedom in their curriculum and assessment practice. New teaching methods and approaches to curriculum were used by teachers across the country’s secondary schools. This period also marked a policy shift in Aboriginal education from that of assimilation to that of integration. State and federal expenditure on education increased (Barcan, 1980), an Australian Schools Commission was established, and various other policy initiatives highlighted the need for equality in education. With the expansion of higher education and education at large, the number of students in teachers’ colleges rose from 15,751 in 1968 to 27,625 in 1973 (Marginson, 1997).

Other changes were on the horizon. The Interim Committee of the Australian Schools released a report in May 1973 that had a profound effect on education in Australia. Entitled *Schools in Australia* - and known as the Karmel Report – three areas were identified for improvement: human and material school resources, inequalities in provision and opportunity, and the quality of education. The 1970s were also marked by a change in government, a decrease in birth rate, and soaring rates of unemployment. It was not until the 1980s that a new educational expansionist perspective began to emerge. This was a marked change from the past because it saw the purpose of education being the production of “*economic citizens*” (Marginson, 1997, p. 147, emphasis his).

Center for the Study of Urban Education

The School of Education at La Trobe University in Melbourne was established in 1970. By 1971, its five centers were operational, including the Center for the study of Urban Education. Degrees offered by the Center included the post-graduate Diploma of Education (Dip.Ed.) and the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.), a degree that was undertaken primarily by teachers with experience and developed specializations for further certification. Shortly after its inception, the Centre for the study of Urban Education put together a project called the “City Educational Task Force.” The central idea of this project was

To combine intensive and rigorous teacher education with a definite practical objective, namely the creation of relevant programmes of education for the city child. Closely allied to this was the intention to study processes of change within particular schools in order to become better informed as to how change is best effected in the real situation of the school. (Claydon, 1973, p. xii)

The architects of this new program aimed to provide further education for practicing urban teachers – beyond what was already available at two other universities in Melbourne. The needs of schools took precedence in designing these courses. Program designers feared that study beyond initial pre-service education was perceived negatively and that many practicing teachers would not be interested in pursuing new knowledge that was disconnected from practice and designed the program with these concerns in mind.

Although there has not been a collective of this size devoted specifically to urban education since the Centre was dismantled due to funding cuts in the late 1980s, urban education is still a focus of some Australian educational researchers (for example Singh, 2005). The reason for this absence can be explained partially by the changing socioeconomic demographics of major cities around Australia. The gentrification of many areas of major cities provided new bourgeois profiles, fuelling real estate property booms that led to the decline of educational agendas which had been previously associated with urban education. This is all despite the fact that “rustbelt” areas (Thomson, 2002) still exist in the urban areas around Australia. That is not to suggest that many overlapping concerns with the project of urban education have not been a prominent part of educational research in Australia but rather that they have been a part of other educational agendas. The needs of “at-risk students,” youth research, disadvantaged schools, and social inequality are some examples of these agendas. One locus of disadvantage that is particularly significant in an Australian context is explored in the next section.

Rural Sustainability and the Normalization of Urbanity

The 2001 Census reported a total population of 18.8 million people living in Australia, including 3.3 million full-time students

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Drawing on Blainey's (1966) notion of Australia's "tyranny of distance," Bill Green (2003) notes that "as distinctively a 'nation-continent,' organized into seven States and Territories, Australia has always been characterised by the need to negotiate the huge distances involved in social life and human interaction, and in agricultural and administrative practice." In order to make sense of this unique relationship between government provision of services and geography it is important to pay attention to the distribution of the Australian population and the measures used to understand it. "The level of remoteness experienced by people is determined, to a degree, by their geographical location" (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003) and calculated by distance to the nearest Australian Bureau of Statistics defined Urban Centres. The map below indicates the remoteness areas in Australia during the 2001 Census and shows how 97% of Australians are located in the major cities and regional areas. It is also important to note that 49% of Indigenous peoples lived in Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote areas combined, compared with 13% of the total Australian population:

PieridesImage



Source: (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003)

It is no wonder that issues of inequality in educational provision for Australia have been defined through the categories of "rurality" and "regional" sustainability rather than "urbanity." Furthermore, media coverage of international assessments of educational outcomes tends to overlook the vast inequalities that exist in the areas of Indigenous and rural education; namely, that Indigenous children do not do as well as, or remain in school as long as non-Indigenous children and that children educated in rural schools are disadvantaged in relation to those in cities. It is the epicentral positioning of the major cities that normalises the experiences of Australians in urban settings. The need for a broader rural-regional notion of sustainability in teacher education has been suggested (Green & Reid, 2004) but the need for urban education research has not been voiced as strongly.

In Australia, educational disadvantage in urban populations could be understood differently through the theoretical insights of the field constituted as urban education. For various reasons however, educational disadvantage has been most closely associated with socioeconomic status and gender (see for example Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003) as well as rural youth and rural education (see for example Wyn & Stokes, 2000; Wyn, Stokes, & Stafford, 1998). These structural relations are nationally specific and have historical significance.

Even though the experiences of rural and urban teachers are so different, new teachers complete the same teacher education programs. This training caters largely to the urban majority but does not focus specifically on urban issues. How might teacher education in Australia be linked with the research goals of a new urban education project so as to allow space for the needs of new rural teachers but also to further inform new teachers about urban settings?

Teacher Education, Policies, and Teaching

The professionalization of teaching has been pursued since the beginning of teacher education in Australia. Tensions in the theory and practice binary have been discursively constructed in and by teaching, teacher education, and policy. Conceptions of what it means to "learn teaching" and to "teach," set up at the very beginning of teacher education in Australia, have been contested ever since. More recently, "new managerialism, which is also referred to as neo-liberalism in the UK and total quality management in the USA" (Davies, 2003, p. 91) has resulted in the "standardization" and "accountability" movements which are still dominating discussions about the "teaching profession." These changes have similarly impacted Australian curriculum and assessment practices in schools through, for example, outcomes-based education and standardised testing (Moss, Wilson, & Pierides, 2005).

By focusing on more generative understandings of the state of teacher education in Australia (Jasman, 2002; Klein, 2003; Sachs & Groundwater-Smith, 1999), it is possible to move toward envisioning teacher education programs that recognize and celebrate urban difference but also have a prominent agenda for social justice. From one perspective, such changes can be understood to be an outcry from teacher educators for recognition. Interestingly, the suggestions by the Centre for the Study of Urban Education, when revisited in the current context, provide a testament to the need for a new urban education project in Australia. How familiar the rationale behind the City Educational Task Force from the 1970s sounds today:

...the problems facing us can only be resolved by teachers working amongst teachers upon the common ground of the school. New knowledge and skills must be brought to it rather than sent or fetched by messengers in the shape of unsupported persons such as the teacher-student... The arena of action must be the school and the nature of the action must be that of conjoint team work by all institutions concerned with schooling. (Claydon, 1973, p. 13)

By disrupting the places and spaces of belonging, teacher education can be (re)located alongside teacher practice in urban settings. Partnership models that bring together teacher educators, practitioner research and urban communities on common ground can provide the arena necessary for achieving social justice. The need for critical and reflexive scholarship on the work of teacher education could not be more important right now for drawing insights from the previously untouched construct of “urbanity.” Discussions around the “professionalization” of teaching, vis-à-vis the “standards” and “accountability” movements have flooded the teacher education literature and research. This may very well be the “issue of the day.”

Without any intention of undermining the importance of these debates or the interconnectedness of the political nature of such work with what is suggested here, I argue that attention must also be paid to a number of neglected areas of teacher education in Australia, including that of urban education. The characteristically pragmatic Australian political culture and the denigration of theory in reproductions of the practice-theory binary continue to constrain teacher education reform and a new urban education project would be in a position to address such areas. We need to imagine new ways, similar to how the City Educational Taskforce did, for understanding the purposes of our work and break the vicious circle of “teacher education policy suggestions without reform.”

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