



Learners and Outcomes: Where Did All the Children Go?

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NOTE TO THE READER: This paper was submitted to the journal SET: Research Information for Teachers in October 2003. It was accepted for publication on 23 February 2004 with the editor's comment 'no changes suggested and publication highly recommended'. Subsequently some minor editorial changes were requested. These were made and the final version of the paper was approved by the editor on 8 April. On 20 April I was told that the paper had 'struck an obstacle at the last moment ... [with] a feeling that there is rather too much emphasis on the ideology component and so a concern that this could compromise NZCER's independence'. Deletion of substantial parts of the paper was proposed by the editor. I accepted these deletions, deciding that it may be worthwhile to publish the comments on language and education that the reduced paper now comprised (this version is now published in SET, 2004, No. 1, 20-22). The only other option was to withdraw the paper.

What follows is the paper as it was accepted on 8 April 2004 for publication in SET. The material that was then subsequently deleted (20 April) is indicated by the text that is shaded in this copy of the paper. The reader may note that the deleted material is all referenced to a significant research literature that examines ideological issues in a considered and scholarly way.

ABSTRACT

Ideas about the nature and purpose of education shape the language that is used to talk about teaching. This influences teaching practice. Research on education policy shows a significant move in New Zealand toward the idea that education is a commodity to be traded in the market place. In this context a language of learners and of outcomes emphasises a production output role for teachers over wider concerns for children and their wellbeing. This paper considers the origins of market ideas and suggests that commercialising education has implications for how teachers relate to children.

There was a time, not so long ago, when talking or reading about teaching and learning in schools meant that we spoke or read about children. Then the language of discussion and documents changed. Schools were suddenly full of 'learners'. This seemed very odd to me. Our cat is a learner. Interesting as he is in his own whiskery way, I would not equate him with the invaluable complexity, wonder and joy that is a child. If people decided to refer to cats in a new way – 'companion animal' is one such terminology – I would probably regret the loss of an essential 'catness' in the language, but not take it too seriously. But I think it is a very serious matter when we stop talking about 'children' in our classrooms and schools. Research on education policy in recent years suggests why there has been a move toward the idea that the children had to go. This has, I suggest, important implications for teachers and teaching.

NEW WORDS FOR OLD

When I have objected to this new terminology, some people have told me that the language does not really matter. But it does, profoundly. Language is how we name the world and assign cultural meanings to who we are and what we do. Those with most power and influence are usually able to name the world in ways that emphasise the meanings valued by their group and that are intended to align the world with their wishes and aspirations (Smith, 1999). For example, it was once usual to read texts and other materials intended to refer to all people but in which every person was referred to as 'he'. To understand this as an issue of power and influence we need only remember the struggle to achieve appropriate and respectful gender-neutral language.

It is in this context, the context of language as both reflecting and maintaining power and influence, that I suggest that the language of 'learner' is problematic and to be resisted. In the context of market ideas that dominate education at present, the term 'learner' is meant to cause us to focus on the utilitarian aspects of what a child does in school. Important as that is, to have that as the focus of a teacher's thought and work is to limit the teacher-child relationship. To focus on a 'learner' would seem to emphasise a concern for what is to be done and to be known. To focus on a child would seem to involve a wider concern for each unique, embodied, whole and entire person.

FROM LEARNING TO OUTCOMES

In the language of education and teaching, the term 'outcomes' is more recent than that of 'learners' but is closely related in origins and intentions. Again, there was a time, not so long ago, when teachers were responsible for learning. Each lesson plan and each longer term plan for each and every child was about learning, about setting goals and each and every day thinking about learning, assessing learning, and striving to achieve learning. Nevertheless, a new terminology says that the focus for teachers must now be on 'learning outcomes'. For example, the document *Education Priorities for New Zealand* (Mallard, 2003) states that teachers and others involved in education are to be 'more explicitly focused on outcomes' (p. 10) and are to make 'learning outcomes central to all debates about education' (p. 13).

Do we need to add the word ‘outcomes’ to learning? I do not think so. However, the language of ‘outcomes’ and of ‘learners’ is a language intended to shape education in particular ways by people with a particular view of the world.

A reshaping of the world of education in New Zealand began in the mid to late 1980s. Gerald Grace (1988) drew attention to the importance of the 1987 Treasury document *Government Management: Brief to the Incoming Government, Volume 2: Education Issues*. The Treasury advice prepared for the Lange Labour government was in the form of a clearly ideological position in which education was no longer to be seen as a public good but as a ‘commodity which can be traded in the market place’ (Grace, 1988: 5). Grace emphasised the importance of the language of the Treasury document that analysed education in terms of ‘inputs, outputs and production functions’ (p. 7) and suggested that Treasury views would have significant effects on subsequent reviews of education policy and practice. That would seem to be the case. For example, Peter Ramsey, a member of the Picot Committee, records that they recommended a collaborative approach to management and leadership in education but that this was subsequently lost under the influence of Treasury and the State Services Commission who successfully argued for a hierarchical, managerialist regime consistent with changes in other sectors of government (Ramsey, 1993). This, together with an emphasis on market competition, supported by influential government and private sector groups, changed education policy and practice in New Zealand in significant ways.

NEW IDEOLOGY FOR NEW SCHOOLS

Education is typically an area of struggle around strongly held views and around whose views should find expression in school organisation, curriculum and classrooms. There can be no doubt that at present a neoliberal, New Right position has won the day in education as in other areas of social and economic life. A market system for state-funded education is in place with the underlying view that education is simply another consumer product that benefits individuals and that should, therefore, be organised along competitive commercial lines (Ramsey, 1993). While the full implementation of this position – a voucher system which, it is claimed, would allow consumers more choice in their purchases (Wylie, 1999) – has not yet occurred, key elements are well established in terms of school competition, corporate models of school management, more detailed curriculum requirements, and more structured levels of achievement objectives, all of which exert increasing control over teachers (Robertson, 1996).

A major strategy for changing education toward market ideology is the presentation of education in a commercial language. For example, schools are ‘audited’, we have curriculum ‘stocktakes’, and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority refers to qualifications as a form of ‘currency’ (QA News, 2001, p. 7). The term ‘provider’ is used extensively, diminishing the cultural significance and distinctiveness of public agencies such as schools, universities and hospitals by saying that they simply ‘provide’ products (outcomes) for purchase by consumers. A term such as ‘health provider’ is surely rather strange (can you ‘provide’ health?) but is now part of the language of government, media and public discourse in New Zealand. The ‘essentially moral’ aims of health and

education are made subservient to commercial values, goals and terminology (Little, 1995, p. 93).

The idea that a market ideology has taken over education sounds like a conspiracy theory, but that is not a useful description of what may be recorded from recent history. Supporters of neoliberal, New Right ideas have simply been successful in promoting their political beliefs. Support has come from diverse groups, including those with traditional conservative values, those with a right-wing position on economics and business, and those made insecure by a harsh economic environment who, from a populist position, blame migrants, ethnic minorities, feminists, beneficiaries and 'Marxist professors' for their perceived plight (Frank, 2002, p. 42). Whatever the support base, it is quite extensive, and over the last twenty years New Right ideas have dominated the philosophy and politics of New Zealand's major political parties and have shaped their economic, social (Child Poverty Action Group, 2003) and educational policies through to the present.

While in this regard New Zealand has moved faster and further than other developed countries (Dale & Ozga, 1993; Fiske & Ladd, 2000), the way in which the Right has won its case, and its pre-eminence across private and public sectors, is similar across countries. In each context, New Right economists have successfully argued for education to be seen as a market system, rejecting non-market models and conceptualising schools in terms of an 'input-output system' with an 'economic production function' in which teachers are producers and children and parents consumers (Marginson, 1997: 101). To shape education into the market model required policies of corporate management and competitive practice. These policies have often been implemented by people in key management positions who have no background in education (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Marginson, 1997; Ramsey, 1993).

The changes were promoted on the basis of claims that schools had been failing. The political Right claimed that unemployment and poverty were not the result of the radical economic restructuring of recent times but arose from individual failings on the part of young people who, it was said, lacked skills relevant to their own and the nation's economic competitiveness and longer term survival (House, 1998). The schools were to blame, and were to be brought under greater control through a new curriculum and more 'accountability' involving test scores or other assessments that are made publicly available. As part of the change process, teachers were subjected to what John Smyth (2002: 3) describes as 'an unrelenting politics of derision' that questioned the quality and motives of teachers and of teacher professional organisations in particular. However, changing the language of education has been understood as the key to creating the new commercial purpose and organisation of schools and schooling (Barker, 1995). Allen Luke and his colleagues (1993) note, for example, that British Secretary of State for Education and Science, Kenneth Baker, promoted the idea of education as a commodity in the UK 'by switching the terms of debate' from issues of inputs and resources to a focus on 'product outcomes' (p. 148). As Amy Wells and her colleagues (2002) suggest, the wide use of corporate language in education makes it difficult to think about alternative, non-commercial purposes for education.

OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS

In this context, it is interesting that an explicit emphasis on outcomes has taken so long to emerge in New Zealand because it can be seen as central to the goals of education in a market context. In his analysis of the creation of market-based education systems, Simon Marginson (1997) refers to reduced taxation and therefore reduced state expenditure as central to the agenda of the political Right. One way to reduce public demand for increased resourcing for public services is to argue that increased government expenditure (input) does not necessarily result in better outputs. Clearly such a case warrants consideration. A school or other agency may be able to deliver its required services, or even to improve on those services, without greater income. On the other hand, that may not be the case, and schools and other state agencies may be genuinely underfunded, in which case maintaining that situation may be a way of ensuring the failure of public services with the goal of subsequent privatisation.

Undoubtedly there is a complex mix of financial imperatives and ideological commitment in these matters. However, Marginson contends that the need for fiscal restraint, together with the commitment of the ideological Right to limiting public spending, resulted in governments claiming that there must be a focus on outcomes '*in place*' of a focus on inputs, as if the two were mutually exclusive' (Marginson, 1997: 125, emphasis in original). Marginson shows that support for this position has been drawn from research that claimed, for instance, that class size (pupil-teacher ratio) or socio-economic context did not affect achievement. He suggests that research critical of the methodology and findings of such studies, or that showed that resources (inputs) and community context were related to achievement, has received much less attention (Marginson, 1997: 123-124). From this perspective, it is evident that the language of 'learning outcomes' has a key role to play in creating and maintaining a market approach to education (Smyth, 2002, Chapter 7).

Learning should, I think, involve something specific and planned for, something that can be assessed by a knowledgeable observer, something valued and of value to the individual and to the community. But learning should also involve the unexpected, the creative link made by the child, the gifted interpretation, something uncertain and unplanned for, that a teacher will recognise as a point of departure for further knowledge, understanding, and skill development. In moving from learning to 'learning outcome', I suggest that there is an intention that learning become something specific, an 'outcome', narrow in its focus because it must be measurable in a particular (behavioural and reductionist) way (Marshall, 1995) and much like the output of a factory, which is what the production-function model of education, the related contractualisation of New Public Management (Olssen, 2001), and a managerialist organisational culture intends (Codd, 1993; Knight, Lingard & Porter, 1993). The government will purchase particular outcomes once these have been defined. To remain competitive, providers will need to attend very carefully to the outcomes that are now their stated purpose. The teacher's role becomes that of a producer increasingly focused on compliance and with their professional knowledge subjugated to the market demands of the consumer (Gallego, Hollingsworth & Whitenack, 2001; Lingard, 2001; Marshall, 1995; Robertson, 1996).

TEACHERS AND POLICY

The New Zealand market system of competing state schools has been shown to increase disparities between richer and poorer schools, to increase ethnic segregation across schools, and to see ethnic minorities concentrated in poorer schools (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Harker, 2000; Lauder, Hughes & Watson, 1999). Those would not seem to be good outcomes for state schools in a democratic society.

A market system emphasises consumer choice. People with greater material and cultural resources are more able to exercise choice and gain benefits, as the New Zealand data on our competing schools shows. An emphasis on choice is part of an ideological belief that individuals have a right to choice and that efficient organisations emerge in markets directed by people's choices. Also, freedom and choice are fundamental aspects of a democratic society. Yet some restraint on choice can be seen as part of the kind of agreements we make in order to achieve a civil society. So, for example, we are not allowed to choose to drive a car at any speed on the highway or to not wear a seat belt, at least not without facing legal consequences. Similarly, we could decide that we should not allow a market model of choice in the state school system because it can be shown to cause harm to some children who find themselves in schools with declining student numbers and declining resources. In the state sector of education, therefore, we might choose a collective model for education directed toward social justice, over a market model directed toward individual choice. We would limit aspects of what is allowed in order to achieve a more fair distribution of educational resources and benefits (Codd, 1993). This is a critical area of policy debate that teachers may contribute to through their experiences, their beliefs (which may include views in support of a market position) and their concern for children.

TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

A concern for children would seem to invoke the teacher as professional but also as a member of a community concerned for its children, perhaps as a parent or grandparent, but in any case an adult with a belief in their responsibility for children. Yet increasingly the talk is of 'learners', not children, in our schools. Will a concern for 'learners' be the same? At present we have a Commissioner for Children. Will we have a 'Commissioner for Learners'?

When we talk of teachers and children, the words communicate culturally determined images and emotions, but I anticipate that in particular we 'see' a teacher as a person with certain characteristics and we 'see' a child of a certain age in a classroom of a certain kind constructed from memory and experience.

When someone talks of learners, what do they see? I can only imagine a disembodied image without a particular age or other defining features, although that may well be a limitation on my part. Nevertheless, the word 'learner' is intended, surely, to stop us talking of 'children'. Its purpose is to reduce our attention to the person of a child and to focus attention on an instrumental goal, learning, defined primarily in commercial terms as marketable skills (Barker, 1995).

To think differently about teaching, to return to children as the focus, requires another language. This language acknowledges the importance of learning, of assessment, and of striving for the highest standards. It recognises key areas of learning such as reading, writing and mathematics as areas of fundamental importance, and knows that these have intrinsic and aesthetic value *as well as* usefulness to the individual and to their society. Learning is seen as grounded in teacher-child relationships, recognising a teacher's concern for the whole 'life worlds' of the child (van Manen, 1999: 14). Attention is given to what is learnt ('outcomes' in market language) but *also* to understanding learning as involving relational processes requiring attention to how a child may experience teaching, which may differ from teacher intentions. This recognises the importance and complexity of different cultural values and meanings in classroom interactions, and requires attention to classroom processes and school context.

An alternative to the present use of a commercial market language in education would not be afraid to use a language of caring when talking about policy and practice (Noddings, 1992; Thrupp, 1998). Some of those who 'dare to teach' (Freire, 1998) may consider their knowledge and work in a language and context of love for children and for the work of teaching. Terms such as 'care' and 'love' may be responded to with derision in the individualist, rational, and positivist world of education as a market commodity. The market requires that teachers provide outcomes, not affection. The term 'learner' is meant to distance the teacher from emotions and to construct the work of teaching as product-oriented. The term 'children' communicates a different sense of teacher and child relationship in which learning is a key purpose but is undertaken within a commitment to care for and about children. Caring for children, which includes caring about their learning, is a greater professional task than responsibility for outcomes. That is why we need to put children back into our talk of classrooms and schools.

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