

Chapter 78

Transforming the Future of Learning: People, Positivity, and Pluralism (and Even the Planet)

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author reflects on a number of themes that she identifies as threads running through multiple chapters in this book. After explaining the background that informs her perspectives, she discusses six areas: what education is for, the relational nature of education, strengths and empowerment, making the implicit explicit, diversity and pluralism, and the importance of context.

INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to be asked to write this chapter, rounding off a book that shines spotlights on a diverse and impressive range of educational research endeavours from Flinders University in South Australia, also encompassing contributions from colleagues hailing from England, China and Italy. The authors come from a range of disciplinary and professional backgrounds and use a wide variety of research methods with differing philosophical underpinnings. All, though, are united in a desire to ‘transform the future of learning’ by deepening our understanding of educational theory, policy and practice, with an (often implicit) aim that is melioristic: to improve the lot of children and adolescents and help them onto positive paths in life.

In a reflective chapter of this nature, the subjectivity of the writer is particularly pertinent. My perspective is somewhat that of an outsider, as I have never been a schoolteacher nor taught student teachers. However, I have always had close connections with school education, through research into areas such as peer tutoring and school bullying. My late brother was a dedicated schoolteacher, while I followed a career as a tertiary educator, including being a psychology professor and departmental head. I specialised in teaching child psychology and also provided psychology services to children. For a decade

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I co-ordinated South Australia's only Masters of Educational Psychology program, which brought me into contact with many agencies and individuals working with young people in educational contexts, and provided opportunities to collaborate with educators in supervising student theses in the field. I am a founder member of Flinders University's research centre SWAPv (Student Wellbeing and Prevention of Violence) and have been a visiting scholar at Osaka University of Education. My views are also no doubt coloured by my various non-professional social identities such as migrant, mother, grandmother and environmental volunteer. Please forgive me, then, if I have taken this opportunity to lead some of my particular hobby-horses out of the stable; I hope readers will find that at least some of my selected themes resonate with them. I thank all the authors for their thought-provoking contributions.

WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR?

John Guenther raises this fundamental question in considering literacy and numeracy assessment in very remote Australian schools, while Shane Pill discusses it in the very different context of the sport/physical education curriculum. Much literature has been dedicated to this philosophical issue, but in the everyday business of education we easily fall back on our taken-for-granted assumptions. The impetus for re-examination of the question by both Guenther and Pill is marginalisation: of sport education, marginalised in the curriculum, and of entire communities, marginalised by cultural difference.

Pill argues that Australian sport education has focused on education *in* movement (techniques and skills, for example), with teachers assuming that other aspects will follow: these are education *about* sport (e.g., sports structures) and education *through* sport in social, cognitive, emotional and moral ways. Arguably, these do not follow automatically when the focus is on education *in* movement. To bring sport in from the cold outer reaches of the curriculum to more fully achieve its educative potential, Pill suggests that what sport education is (or could be) 'for' is the development of human capital: physical, emotional, social, intellectual and financial. This holistic reframing may also avoid the marginalisation of students who do not excel in physical skill-drill activities, as their learning will be explicitly about much more than that.

To turn to the other example, the introduction of national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN) in Australia highlights the fact that very remote schools with high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have relatively low literacy and numeracy levels, and these have not changed despite considerable efforts to 'close the gap'. These efforts are driven by a discourse of 'disadvantage', Guenther says, which is not shared by the communities themselves. On the disadvantage view, education is 'for' gaining competences and qualifications that will give these children possible futures that consist of engagement with, and participation in, mainstream Australia, but which reflect western philosophical ideas of what a 'good' education is. As Guenther shows, taking the time to listen to people in these communities reveals that most children do not have a future career orientation based upon western perceptions of 'career', but aspire to be like their elders and other prominent community members. Their ideas of 'success' are culturally based and the western concept of academic success is not an important theme. Furthermore, their sense of wellbeing comes from connection to country, which generally wins out over the pull of cities. Most speak an Indigenous language at home, yet are instructed in English at school.

Indigenous children labelled as 'truants' might therefore be justified in wondering what school is 'for' and in voting with their feet. I was dismayed when the Northern Territory abandoned its bilingual teach-

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