



Peer – reviewed Paper

Narrating the politics of methodology: Researching in early childhood education.

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Educational research has complex and intrinsic obligations not only to itself as a multi-disciplinary field but to those who make decisions in education – from early childhood teachers to ministers of education (see Saunders, 2008). This edition of *He Kupu* is being written at a time when policymakers and researchers are asking for educational policy and practice to be informed by high quality research. However, interpretations of ‘high quality’ often excludes from the frame of consideration much research based upon individual case studies or narratives, as well as philosophical research work or critical theory (see Bridges, Smeyers & Smith, 2008). In this paper we attempt to place educational research generally within a broad, critical and ethical context in relation to literacy and early childhood education, which is the focus of this edition.

Before examining these ideas in turn we propose: 1) a brief discussion/critique of instrumental rationality which is at the centre of a psychologically-based curriculum discourse, (the claims for ‘evidence-based’ practice), and some thoughts on the politics of methodology; 2) a questioning of the notions of ‘evidence-based’ knowledge and practice and assumptions about epistemology, and 3) to lay claim to the democratization of research frameworks for education, with a brief discussion of an alternative methodology for both teacher practice and academic research. This would include narrative methodology and its offerings to early childhood education research in the context of one particular example the ‘learning’ story.

Instrumental Rationality and the Politics of Methodology

What is instrumental rationality? Briefly, instrumental rationality characterizes educational aims that focus on specific learning outcomes, where knowledge is compartmentalized, where pedagogy is separated from content, where theory is separated from practice. Philosophical approaches to educational theory are very committed to constant interrogation of and challenge to instrumental rationality.

Knowledge formulation in the current era of economic rationalism is often approached in ways that confirm more traditional methodologies or research in the social sciences and scientific disciplines. Empirical research and cognitive rationalist or ‘instrumentalist’ ways of producing knowledge facilitates accountability demands for quantifiability of funding and investment. However, we might ask, are the best interests of those in holistically and creatively focused education such as early childhood, best served by instrumentalsed



approaches to research and knowledge production? In early childhood education, invention, making, creativity and questioning are central to pedagogy as seen in *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum document for New Zealand. Diverse knowledge systems and ways of accessing cultural knowledge and creative arts practice spell a need for appropriate research methodologies. 'Streamlined rational judgment is often and almost always in the context of policy-making, a convenient fiction, a ritual of justification, that is trying to ignore, or worse, disguise the complexities involved in situational judgment' (Elliott & Lūkes, 2008, p. 110). Early childhood centres are in deeply situated contexts, socially, economically, culturally and politically.

Many philosophers have questioned the belief that all research must have 'an epistemological basis [which] implies that epistemology (theory of knowledge) is to be foundational... The phrase "research findings" carries a strong implication of empiricism' (see R. Smith, 2008, p.184-5). Richard Smith further points to J. Law's (Law, 2004, p. 143, cited in Smith 2008, p. 185) suggestion that social science research not only creates 'a set of procedures for reflecting and conveying knowledge about reality' (Smith, 2008, p.185), but it 'helps to produce realities' (p.185), rebundling and recrafting realities and creating 'new versions of the world' (Law, as cited in Smith, 2008, p.143). New 'resonances, new manifestations and new concealments,' are thus created (p.143). In other words through repeated usage and reference, a single view or reality about research has come to dominate all others. School effectiveness-type research conjures up a view of the world in which broader issues of social injustice and exclusion become invisibilised. Research promoting constantly improving test and examination results progressively inducts us into a world where it is assumed that selection and assessment are the prime points of education, indeed, that this *is* education. For early childhood educators the rigidity and inflexibility of 'these sclerotic life forms' (Smith, 2008, p. 188) are contrary to how practice is understood and conceptualised.

With the introduction this year of National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics (Ministry of Education, MoE, 2010) early childhood educators are faced with some difficult choices in their professional roles. What is apparent is that evidence based assessment has now become the accepted order of the day for schools (see MoE, 2010). It appears that pressure will in turn, be brought to bear on the early childhood sector to follow suit (see McLachlan, 2010, in this issue). The sense is that literacy, in the broad sense of the current early childhood curriculum, will be changed so as to comply with schools. With pressures on teachers to teach to the 'standards' and not according to where the teacher, in the light of professional judgment, judges 'the child to be at,' in terms of the child's aptitudes, raises some important issues for all those involved in the early childhood sector.

Questioning the notions of 'evidence-based' knowledge and practice and the assumptions made about epistemology.

We draw the attention to early childhood educators to Elliott and Lūkes (2008) observations concerning the need for researchers to be wary of evidence based practice as the *only* acceptable source of knowledge for policy. They state:



While there is little to be contested about the sentiment that policy-makers should base their decisions on the available evidence, the domain of medicine, upon which this implicit metaphor is based, often serves as an inadequate analogue to the problems faced by education and other social domains...The idea that teachers and educational policy makers can behave like physicians in basing their decisions on the knowledge of the latest available evidence is doomed to failure from the start... Apart from what we know about the differences in the stability and individual transmissibility of sociological versus medical knowledge, both these types of practitioners operate in markedly different contexts' (Elliott and Lūkes 2008, p.109-110).

Early childhood teachers cannot, for instance, constantly keep up with the most recent developments in their field through studying or conference attendance. These elements are mostly absent in the educational context. Elliott and Lūkes (2008, p.100) conclude significantly, that 'questions about the level of confidence or warrant that can be placed in different sorts of research evidence and findings cannot be answered independently of forming a view about the appropriateness of the policy culture that shapes political decision-making.' Hence, in reality, the opportunity to disseminate, discuss and engage with policy is not as available in early childhood teaching as in other professions, and discussion of ideas can be limited.

The Democratisation of research frameworks

Bridges, Smeyers & Smith (2008, p. 6), point to the context of educational research and its 'increasing diversification, segmentation and hybridisation'. They ask how the *quality* of educational research can be developed in ways that do not exclude a multitude of intellectual resources that can contribute to educational understanding. In this vein, they see research, policy and practice becoming somewhat blurred and the boundaries softening as teachers themselves engage in research and, as Saunders argues (2008, p.1), '[w]e can no longer construct the 'Other' with confidence that we know wherein the defining differences between research, policy and practice lie'. Numbers and percentages are seen as though they alone embody the principles of 'Truth' and 'Progress'. However, ways of knowing are multiple and cultural narratives ought not to be limited to one way of being or one voice, nor should the potential for difference be limited. In some instances the impoverishment of what counts as research – the glib 'what works,' dictum – has been officially sanctioned in circles of global economic governance, especially in OECD countries.

These are points that are often made in early childhood education scholarship and research by Rogoff (1990), MacNaughton (2004), Nuttall (2006), Edwards (2008), Dahlberg & Moss (2005) and Pacini-Ketchabaw & Pence (2005), and many other sources common to early childhood scholarship. In New Zealand the deconstructing methodologies of Linda Smith that share similar thoughts are familiar to an early childhood audience and yet how can we ensure that these values can be maintained in practice. It is an especially difficult task when government looks to co-opting opinion through a mirage of facts screened through values that are held, 'and frameworks taken for granted within particular communities' (Oancea & Pring, 2008, p. 34). These values and traditions of



knowledge bound by dominant ideologies have to be challenged within the philosophy of education where the ethics around the instigation and applications or use of research can be argued and debated. A policy culture bathed in 'an epistemologically transcendent account of the representativeness of sampled data' (Elliott & Lükes, 2008, p.115) is entirely inadequate as a research culture for education in general, let alone early childhood education.

Those engaging in narrative inquiry - in contradistinction to educational aims dominated by instrumental rationality - have celebrated teaching and learning 'as complex and developmental in nature, seeking connections, and demanding continuous engagement, reflection and deliberation' (Jeong Kim & MacIntyre Latta, 2010, p.69). John Dewey (1938) discusses the notion of preparedness in education discourses as centrally concerning:

When preparation is made at the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted. The ideal of using the present merely to get ready for the future contradicts itself. It omits and even shuts out, the very conditions by which a person can be prepared for his [sic] future (Dewey, 1938, p. 49, cited in Kim & Latta, 2010, p.70).

Talks Stories or Learning Stories

'Talk Stories' are a narrative methodology articulated and celebrated by Margaret Carr at an NZARE (New Zealand Association for Research in Education) conference some years ago. The 'narrative methodology' of the 'talk stories,' or 'learning stories,' as commonly understood in New Zealand, are particularly powerful for early childhood educators as they place at the heart of education early childhood educators and their tacit knowledge, their intuitively, culturally-based knowledge, their gender-based and musically or artistically-based knowledge that may not be represented in 'evidence-based' research. We can see here the philosopher located within the teacher/practitioner who can create, through practical philosophy, knowledge that is situational and equal to academic knowledge (see Elliott & Lükes, 2008). Further, built into this kind of early childhood-generated practice is 'accountability' but importantly, it is on the terms and conditions of early childhood educators themselves and not on the terms of evidence-based dictums/dictates. The learning story narrates and embodies the idea of educational research 'in its fullest and deepest exemplification, being practiced as an art and a craft as well as a science' (Saunders, 2008, p. 3). Both imagination and rationality find space in the learning story. Theory and practice work relationally and can be revealed as both potentially generative and performative (see Grierson, 2009). The importance of emphasizing the turn towards "storying" in research, cannot be over-emphasised. Saunders suggests that:

Narrative feels like a ... capacity which we intuitively bring to bear even on the most unadorned numerical datasets. If a story is trustworthy and recognizable, there is an immediate generalisability to be derived from the very act of recognition. Moreover, part of the 'storying' impulse is to complicate simple notions of 'cause-and-effect', to make patent the contingent and contextual, and to reveal



intentions, beliefs, values and attitudes, as well as the actions of different characters/agents. In the human and social sciences it cannot be scientific to ignore them (Saunders, 2008, p. 3).

If learning stories help to produce and develop knowledge and understanding, they do this artistically and creatively through dialogue. Thinking that accommodates different ways of being in research (after Heidegger, 1999, p. 311, cited in Grierson & Brearley, 2009, p. 9) encourages the embracing of qualitative methodologies to broader, more inclusive narratives and inquiry narratives.

Conclusion

The case has been made for a re-consideration of instrumental rationalist approach based on learning outcomes in early childhood education. With so much evidence based research pointing to ways to increase performance or literacy standards, this has implications for how teachers may see themselves and their role especially when opportunities to enter into discussions and debate are not readily available to the profession. It may be very difficult to resist the onset of change to a more evidence based approach to literacy if teachers in early childhood sector cannot examine and see how their practice is being undermined. What becomes apparent is the importance of understanding of the processes involved in the politics of knowledge. As a form of research, narrative enquiry, offers a means whereby the learning story as an example, reveals learning as a rich learning environment.

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