

Education, Philosophy, Research: Opening space for moves towards social justice in research

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Given the complex inter-relationship of social/educational research with, on the one-side global capitalist systems and technology¹, and on the other, governmental institutions concerned with security, including, as Foucault² saw more than three decades earlier, education, health and welfare. *Given* the sublime and ever-growing powers involved in the enframing of populations³. *Given*, too, the growing polarizations in this country and in many of other societies⁴, cultivated by forms of neoliberalist discourse around the globe. Especially, *given* such discourse foregrounds 'privatization, commodification, free trade and deregulation'⁵ in accord with 'free market fundamentalism... that now shapes and possibly threatens 'all aspects of life' around the world⁶. While largely 'excluding' or reducing to a 'state of exception'⁷ and so placing on permanent 'life support' ⁸ any democratic 'public' space cultivating 'citizenship', 'solidarity' ⁹, and the 'fragile prospect of comradeship underpinning the achievement of liberty/equality'¹⁰. *Given* these and other complex issues, it was no surprise to find that within the institution of social/educational research there has been considerable interest, albeit not expressed in these terms, in pushing against the limits of *what is given* in practice¹¹. At issue are the limits imposed by the everyday economy of exchange involved in the giving and receiving of a gift in order to open such practice to the possibility of improvement¹².

Over the last thirty years within the international field of school improvement¹³, for example, there remains a completely undimmed passion from many researchers to find ways of pushing against the limits of what is given in practice in order to open space¹⁴ for the improvement of measurable outcomes for young people's learning¹⁵. Similar drives and passions are in evidence in the fields of social/educational research more generally¹⁶. Such moves accord with the requirement for the reproduction of rigorous truth claims to knowledge in 'school improvement'¹⁷ research and other forms of inquiry more generally¹⁸. Indeed, there continues to be much debate, generated by one of the international leaders in this field, David Hopkins¹⁹, drawing from the earlier groundbreaking work of Lawrence Stenhouse²⁰, concerned with whether one should regard any truth claims to knowledge as intelligent rather than correct. Understandably, then, within the economy of exchange of improvement such intelligence opens space for leadership, professionalism and so-called improved practices mediating learning at all levels within the 'apparatus of education'²¹. But, such an economy of exchange of what is given in practice in the field of improvement research is largely grounded in a homogenous ethic foregrounding the conditional, calculable, possible dimensions of young people's existence²².

At issue behind all the headlines concerned with improvements in education²³, is the naming force aligned to the sublime gathering powers of that tiniest of words in our lexicon, the 'is'. In other words the powers of being as presence at work in every nominalization and verb in the languages of improvement, social/educational research, and in language more generally ²⁴. In an earlier study with Nick Peim, rather than continuing to operate within any of the existing paradigms of research concerned with the production of knowledge, we had sought to deconstruct the apparatus of education against indications drawn from

the possibilities open to human beings²⁵. Here was a move towards the possibility of social justice – ‘deconstruction is always mad about justice’²⁶. It opens space for hospitality concerned with what is unconditional about the possibilities of human existence. Unconditionally, such myriad possibilities, of course, are incalculable and impossible ever to identify fully. Unconditionally as human beings in the multifarious possibilities of our express sense of being, our everyday practices are always open to what hitherto may have been regarded as impossible and incalculable dimensions of practice. They accord with a heterogeneous ethic²⁷ of practice.

But, currently the apparatus of education²⁸, along within more instrumental forms of research²⁹ concerned with the generation of new truth claims to knowledge, remain locked within economies of exchange of what is *given* by the enframing³⁰ of practice. In this way what is revealed in these economies is ordered and so delimited by the principle of assessment – ‘nothing of value in practice *is* made public without independent assessment’³¹. Such enframing reduces the existence of human beings to a ‘standing reserve’³² of energy and possibilities – a huge reservoir.

Ironically in this way these many systems of improvement of education and of practices more generally generated through research are always in danger of rendering the body of populations around the globe as simply being available for use within the dominant system of capitalism. This hardly constitutes grounds for moves towards social justice.

In a nutshell what is required, surely, is a form of research that aligns the reproduction of truth claims to knowledge with moves towards social justice through democratically grounded and communitarian-based research³³. In more radical forms of research informally such moves have been in operation for many years³⁴. At issue is the challenge of educational/social research, along with its aligned practices of education emerging from such research, that open space for hospitality to a heterogeneous ethic of practice for human beings. At issue are forms of research that are ever alert to moves towards social justice. At issue are moves through research towards *balancing* rather than generating ever-growing sublime powers mediating human existence. At issue remains the need for greater understanding of people’s experiences of living in a ‘state of exception’ in this age of technology. At issue remains the imperative to understand more about the education people experience through their engagement with different practices outside the apparatus of education – practices of research, everyday complex practices of living and working in urban, sub-urban and rural landscapes with the media and a multiplicity of technologies always at hand. At issue remains just how such education mediates, shapes and possibly delimits people’s existence. The stakes are high. At issue remains the integrity of human *co-existence* in the biosphere on this planet.

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