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Negotiating Agendas: Adult Educators & Neoliberalism in Private Training Establishments

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Like all education, adult education is not neutral; it is very much tied to hegemonic interests within a given society...Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to deny agency for change to those working within mainstream institutions. (Peter Mayo)

Abstract: This study explores the impact of neoliberalism on adult education in New Zealand by examining the experiences of 14 educators and directors in four Private Training Establishments (PTEs). While the effects of neoliberal ideology and policy have been significant, the findings indicate that adult educators critically examine their practice and constantly negotiate their own agendas.

The Context

Over the past 20 years, adult educators have been placed under increasing pressure by government and by “the Rightward turn in education” to meet outcomes and show ‘measurable’ progress for students (Apple, 2000). Efficiency, competition and privatization have permeated educational discourse, due to what is, arguably, a neoliberal agenda. In New Zealand, there is a tendency to think of this “Rightward turn” as more pronounced and influential, given the extent of the reforms made to post-compulsory education in the late 1980s and 1990s (Peters, 2001; Roberts, 1997).

Out of educational reforms made under neoliberal governments in the 1980s, a new category of post-secondary education provider was created in New Zealand: Private Training Establishments (PTEs). Since their inception in 1989, PTEs have played an important role in adult education in New Zealand, surfacing throughout the country in the form of language schools, vocational training schools, literacy centers, art academies, and even business schools; as of March 2004, there were 900 registered PTEs nationwide (Education Directions Ltd, 2004). Although many PTEs have fee-paying students and are run as corporations, there are a large number that provide ‘second-chance’ education through government-funded vocational training and skills-enhancement courses for those with few or no qualifications. The teachers and directors in these PTEs work with school ‘drop outs’, refugees, and the long-term underemployed and unemployed. Many of these second-chance PTEs are Trusts and have close ties to the community; some even describe themselves as “community-oriented.” These are the organizations I chose to look at for this research project.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to look at the directors and educators who worked in self-proclaimed “community-oriented PTEs”. My research question was concerned with how my participants conceptualized their roles, and how they have experienced and have been affected by policies associated with neoliberalism. Since such policies often tend to go hand-in-hand with an underlying emphasis on individualism, competition, and self-interest (Peters, 2001; Olssen, 1996), I also wanted to uncover the ideological influences on educators working with marginalized and disenfranchised sectors of society; educators purportedly concerned with social justice, equity and serving the community. As an educator, student and New Zealander, I came to this research project believing that adult education was losing its mission of social justice under a neoliberal framework. I saw such a framework as reducing teacher autonomy by pressuring

educators to satiate government desires for outcomes, assessments, and student enrollment numbers. I wanted to discover how much autonomy organizations had, and how community-oriented PTEs were directly affected by the neoliberal agenda.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Since I wanted to explore the possibilities and limitations to human agency, I looked to theories on critical pedagogy, social reproduction and resistance. The work of Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire were most influential in my theoretical framework. These theories and ideas provided a theoretical lens through which I was able to analyze the thoughts and experiences of teachers and directors vis-à-vis neoliberalism.

In my research, I wanted to explore whether Freire's radical conception of adult education existed in any form within the organizations I studied. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued that educators should assume a 'problem-posing' or 'critical' approach to education in order to halt the reproduction of oppressive ideologies (Freire, 2000). According to Freire, teachers should adopt "a point of view that favors the autonomy of the students" (1998, p.21), encouraging students to critically reflect so to make meaningful differences in their lives (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For Freire, educators are entrusted with facilitating "conscientization", which "...occurs in the transforming moment where critical reflection is synthesized with action" (Roberts, 1996, p.188). I was also interested in Freire's notion of "limit situations", a term he used to refer to the obstacles facing critical educators. Freire himself acknowledged that being a progressive or critical educator under the hegemony of neoliberalism was not easy. He wrote, "Today the resistance to progressive pedagogy is manifested, above all, in neoliberal discourse" (Freire, 1996, p.114). In addition, in one of his final works (released after his death in 1997), Freire (1998) described neoliberalism as "a discourse against hope". He lamented:

Many have succumbed to fatalism, pessimism, and the program of neoliberalism—the doctrine according to which we have no choice but to adapt both our hopes and our abilities to the new global market. (1998, p.7)

At the same time, however, Freire urged educators to counter these limit situations as best they could:

Thus it is not the limit situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers. (2000, p.80)

I wanted to understand in what ways neoliberalism was a limit situation for educators and directors in PTEs, and how these directors and educators resisted or conformed to the neoliberal agenda.

I also saw Giroux's ideas on resistance in education as enabling me to gain a deeper understanding of how agency could play out in community-oriented PTEs. In the early 1980s, Giroux (1983) put forward a dialectical notion of human agency. He posited, "Students and teachers do not simply comply with the oppressive features of schooling as radical critics suggest...In some cases, groups resist and modify practices." (p.58) Giroux developed Freire's ideas on progressive education, arguing that teachers and students can actually aid in the production of information and mediate it. In effect, Giroux put forth the idea that there are often multiple agendas, some of which teachers may adopt or endorse and some of which they may reject or resist. Indeed, those involved in education are able to counteract certain tenets of neoliberalism while conforming to others.

Methodology

In my study, I wanted to be able to express plurality and contradictions, providing a ‘snapshot’ of my participants’ experiences and ideas. I was not seeking definitive answers that could be expanded to explain the experiences of all adult educators in New Zealand, but rather was attempting to investigate and understand the motivations and beliefs held by a limited number of people working in community-oriented PTEs. For this reason, I chose a qualitative approach. As Merriam (1998) has noted, qualitative research is the best method to describe, explain and explore phenomena.

This study comprised four case studies, consisting of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews lasting anywhere from 50 minutes to three hours. The data set included 14 participants, both educators and directors, from four different PTEs: Life Training, Pacific Roots, Working Skills, and Language Trust. The pre-requisite in choosing interviewees was that they worked at PTEs that provided second-chance education. It was also important that the PTEs were small, and considered themselves to be ‘community-oriented’. All organizations stated that they were providing employment skills, and/or literacy training to adults. Working Skills considered itself a Maori PTE, Pacific Roots worked exclusively with members of Pacific Island community, Language Trust focused solely on providing literacy training and, Life Training served younger adults working towards their high school diplomas or basic employment skills. Anonymity was preserved for respondents and the organizations where they worked. I used open-ended questions which allowed participants to define problems or situations as they saw them and used a process of triangulation to verify validity of my results (Merriam, 1998). I then transcribed and coded the data thematically.

Findings

Through my research I found that most interviewees were acutely aware of the pressures they faced due to the emphasis placed by government agencies on assessment, outcomes and monitoring; funding and formal registration of the PTEs relied upon being able show measurable results in terms of student pass rates, employment numbers, and fiscal prudence. My participants were often critical and, at times, attempted to counter these techno-rationalist approaches to education. However, as Giroux suggests, educators endorse and reproduce social structures, as well as resist and negotiate. Adult educators in community-oriented PTEs worked within the system available to them; in some ways they countered that system and in others they did not.

Caught Between a Rock & a Hard Place

In general, most participants were critical of current government policies that placed undue, unrealistic pressures on PTEs to pass students and have them obtain employment upon leaving. According to teachers and managers, it was extremely difficult for most students to pass the basic courses and to find employment. Simon (Language Trust), Eva and Kate (Working Skills) all described their students as “the too hard basket” that “no-one else really wanted.” As Simon put it, “we get it all—people that nobody wants—the too hard baskets. And that’s the truth. The other end of the scale.” Many students had been unemployed for a long time, despite the falling unemployment rate. Eva guessed that only about 25% of the students at the PTE where she worked had probably ever had full-time employment. She stated, “[They’re] third-generation unemployed who sometimes have no idea what it is to have a full-time job. They’ve never seen it. They don’t understand”. Furthermore, a majority of respondents mentioned that a number of their students had evident psychological and mental disorders; something which stood as an impediment to them both passing or finding a job.

Most educators were frustrated at how their autonomy was compromised under current requirements. Simon observed:

...a lot of the policies change each year. You get a new buzzword, then there's a new focus group in government. To me, now, it's like we're the puppets on the end of the string. We have to dance to the tune—'cos we're funded by another organization. If we don't do that...we don't do certain things, our funding gets cut.

Some of the interviewees explicitly complained how pre-packaged curriculum had come to dominate their classes, encroaching on their ability to teach *how* and *what* they wanted to teach. Both tutors and directors were critical of the model of competition which encouraged PTEs to compete with one another. In addition, Brendon (Life Training) referred disparagingly to the “bums on seats’ paradigm”, which he believed characterized government agencies’ conceptions of successful education; in other words, if the students were in the classrooms, and in jobs, the schools had succeeded. Some respondents refused to conform to requirements. The people I interviewed at Pacific Roots stated that they actively resisted ‘jumping through the hoops’ put before them by funding agencies. As Filip explained, “one of the reasons the funding bodies don’t like us is that they see us as having an attitude of you-can-pull-our-funding-but-we’re-gonna-say-NO”. He expressed his incredulity at government requirements:

We’re asked why aren’t we passing people? And yet we told the funding body, ‘Hello? Well, half the time they were in court, half of the time was trying to get them out of prison, the other half [sic] of the time they were heavily medicated or they were still in spin-mode-out-of-control’, but they still expected us to have pass rates!

And, as Eva put it, “what outcome? Outcome-based learning is a fraud.”

Although critical, most people did focus on meeting outcomes to varying degrees. When I asked one educator about teaching styles, she answered bluntly, “Whatever it takes to get outcomes—could be one-on-one, groups, lecturing in front of the class” (Eva). Although government funding agencies required that a certain percentage of students pass and find jobs, most of my participants admitted that this was only attained to the detriment of students. Kate concluded that students who did pass were either being funneled through or that the facts students needed to know in order to pass could be rote-learned and forgotten in a matter of days. She continued, “I was told of one story where teachers obtained employment for their students through a friend for two months in order to ‘make outcomes’, even though students were then laid-off”. Eva also told me:

We could hook up with employers so they’d take the students on for a couple of months and then forget about them, just so we make our outcomes; if we were crafty and didn’t care about the students.

Furthermore, not all respondents were critical of the stress placed on assessment and outcomes; in fact, some participants believed that an incentive-based structure and increased accountability for students was necessary. Moreover, several respondents had adopted the rhetoric of the Right that Roberts (1997) (among others) identified in the 1990s when words and phrases like ‘accountability’, ‘strategic planners’ and ‘performance indicators’ became commonplace. Many respondents mentioned the ideas of ‘contracts’, ‘providers’, and ‘stakeholders’. And, even though most respondents lamented the way in which pre-packaged curriculum dominated their classes, some liked the fact that it made things “easier”.

Acting Upon the World In Order To Transform It

Although seemingly forced into a model of education that determines student success by whether certain quotas are met, most educators and directors were motivated by ideals of

education for social and cultural justice. The mission statement at Pacific Roots read, “We acknowledge the right to work meaningfully, the right to social equity, the right to hope and the pursuit of justice”. According to David, the Director, Pacific Roots “develop[ed] the resourcefulness of the people of the Pacific who are excluded from opportunities in this society.” Filip, the head tutor, stressed to me the importance of connecting students with the Pasifika community. He told me that the older and younger generations were encouraged to come and work with students at the school as the adult learners became reconnected with the larger community. Both Pacific Roots and Working Skills used hip-hop and Pacific and Maori dramatic arts to help students reconnect with their culture and traditions. Eva stated that their PTE practiced ‘affirmative action’. Across the board, Maori and Pacific Island students were given priority. Classes at all PTEs were small and relationship-based, with many teachers committed to student-centered and contextualized lessons which were meaningful in students’ lives. For example, at Working Skills, educators worked to build a greater connection between the local *iwi* (Maori tribe) and the urban Maori who attended the school. At Language Trust, one Maori literacy educator described to me how he had been able to integrate his philosophy on Maori culture and history into his basic literacy classes. And, at Life Training, teachers described how they had been able to take students to see a photographic exhibition put together by world-renowned critical journalist John Pilger; a trip which generated much discussion by students on issues of human rights and justice. Most respondents I spoke with said that they tried to promote a community atmosphere in the PTEs in which they worked.

Some respondents, like Graeme and Chris from Life Training, challenged the status quo merely by choosing to teach courses they believed were important in addressing the social ills in society. Those I interviewed from Pacific Roots and Language Trust seemed to be more forthcoming about their commitment to giving students the tools to be able to change their own worlds. Not only did respondents question the corporatization of education promoted under neoliberal philosophy, but they also believed that their PTEs offered a marked improvement from public providers of education. In fact, according to several respondents many public schools were even more influenced by a neoliberal agenda of marketized, individualized education, which did not place student welfare first. Although purportedly committed to student outcomes and assessment, educators were, in some way, able to negotiate their own space for becoming transformative educators.

Discussion & Implications

This study raises more questions than it answers and has implications far beyond the New Zealand context. The increasing privatization of adult education, premised on neoliberal conceptions of education as an individual and private affair, has resulted in many educators and students turning to the private sector. At the same time, there has been much backlash against private adult education. Non-profit, community-oriented, Private Training Establishments present an interesting case: their mission is ostensibly public, working with those who are often not served in the public sector. These students are the ‘drop outs’, the disenfranchised; they are Freire’s oppressed.

At the end of one of my interviews, a participant told me frankly: “If you want to change the system, you’ve gotta be part of the system...A lot of our students...aren’t quite part of the system” (Simon). This really brought home to me the challenges and responsibilities adult educators have in helping to make meaningful differences in students’ lives and in bringing back social justice as one of the aims and concerns of adult education. The current system may be predicated on an idea of education as an individualized, private good which is easily measured.

However, in spite of this current climate, educators have not been entirely co-opted and brainwashed by a neoliberal agenda. Neoliberalism may be a 'limit situation'; however, as Giroux (1983) has argued, there are always differing agendas at play. My research suggests that there are contradictions and compromises. Those who work in adult education do not merely reflect or buy into prominent ideologies; rather, they are engaged in a process that is continually being negotiated.

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