

SHIFTING CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING: RESEARCHING ACROSS THE THEORY PRACTICE DIVIDE IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Living Theories: My Background

In many ways it is something of an irony that I have ended up as an educational researcher, and in other ways not. I grew up as the eldest and only daughter in a family of three children, and am a 5th generation Pakeha New Zealander. My mother is the daughter of sharemilkers with mixed Scottish and Irish ancestry, she left school before she sat School Certificate to work in a bank. My father came from a family of horse breeders and trainers. He, and his stepbrother were the first children in his family to attend university, both eventually gained Ph.D's in the 1960's, my father's in Veterinary Science. He worked as a researcher, a vet and a farmer.

Having left school young and underqualified, my mother was determined that wasn't going to happen to me and encouraged me from an early age. One of her greatest gifts to me was her love of stories and reading, and we both read voraciously as I grew up. My schooling career was chequered to say the least. I was often bored, articulate, outspoken, and openly disruptive. I attended three secondary schools and was asked to leave the boarding hostel of one of them. Eventually I attended a private girls boarding school that channelled my strengths and enthusiasms and tolerated my challenges. I left school with a B bursary in 1975, to study English literature and Art History at University. Once there, I became immersed in second wave liberal and radical feminisms and university politics. These ideologies provided some analysis of my life experiences and further fuelled my passion to 'make a difference'. They resonated deeply with my life experiences growing up and negotiating the expectations of what it meant to be a young woman in small town rural communities in 1970's New Zealand, and thinking that I wanted something different. Second wave feminism, probably most particularly radical feminism provided me with an analysis of gender and its role in

influencing life opportunities, and some (admittedly problematic) ways to think about making social change. These were heady days. I left with a BA in English and Art History in the early 1980's, and after a short and disappointingly tedious interlude at Teachers College, decided to give secondary teaching a go, not imagining that I would last very long at all. My mother noted with some irony that perhaps I owed something to the profession...

Although I taught for sixteen years and loved working with students, I always had something of an ambivalent relationship to my role as a teacher, although I loved teaching English and found out that I was surprisingly good at it! I worked in a wide range of differing schools, several in low socio-economic areas. Schools appeared not to have changed much since I attended them, and my resistance to the regulatory aspects of schooling had not diminished over the years. Despite the high level of expertise I demonstrated as an English Teacher and curriculum leader, I had a number of ongoing and troubling questions in relation to educational inequalities particularly in relation to gender and diverse sexualities in low decile schools, that could never be satisfactorily answered or addressed. Due to my earlier involvement in radical feminism I was open about my sexuality with both colleagues and students since beginning a relationship with a woman in my mid twenties. Despite my political outspokenness (or maybe because of it?) my expertise as a teacher appeared to protect me from a lot of gender and sexuality based harassment that I witnessed both teachers and students experiencing at school.

In 1990 I enrolled at University for an M.Ed. in the hope that it my help to address my concerns. That was where I learned to undertake research, and began to see the potential it held in terms of creating social change. Once hooked, I found I couldn't go back to schools, and that I could achieve a great deal more by undertaking research in schooling contexts. Increasingly now I find that I need the time and space to think and write and read around the practice and theory contexts that I undertake research in. My current position provides me with some of that space. Whereas in the beginning I thought that practice was the main venue to make changes, increasingly now, I find that theory helps me understand the dilemmas that present themselves in practice, and helps me find ways to think through and

act differently in relation to the challenges that present themselves. Since I began researching, the theory practice divide that I am situated between has made me have to think harder and in a more considered way about what it means to know, to teach and to learn. My teaching in the areas of genders and sexualities, curriculum and inclusion is strongly influenced by my research.

Next I want to move on to outline the major shifts and changes that I have gone through in terms of arriving at my current theoretical and methodological positions.

Researching Across the Theory Practice Divide: The First Stage

As I indicated earlier when I went back to University part time to begin my M.Ed in 1990, the major frames I used to understand the world were radical and to a lesser degree, lesbian feminism. Because Education papers always appeared quite boring to me I decided to take Advanced Feminist Theory and Advanced Feminist Methods (with my strong feminist convictions I figured that I would fit right in). I found instead that a lot had changed in terms of conceptualising what gender meant since I had run around wielding placards in pink overalls in my earlier University days. In many ways engaging with post structural feminist theories and methodologies were extremely hard to do for me at that stage. One of the reasons was that I was strongly wedded to practice because of my deep investment in my teacher identity and level of expertise (Taubman, 2006). It proved challenging to let that go and open myself up to this dense and complex post structural feminist theoretical and methodological theory. Perhaps it speaks to the entrenched nature of the theory /practice divide that I simply didn't see the relevance of theory at first, and that I felt intimidated by the unfamiliar and high status of theoretical ways of knowing (Quinlivan, Boyask & Carswell, 2009)? Plus I also came into the papers with clear questions that I wanted to answer and address. At that stage my practice 'blinkers' meant I wanted to learn how to do research, rather than engage substantively with the dilemmas research entails. I was gaining a sense of the power that research exercised, and that the kind of research you undertook was different depending on the kind of questions that you wanted to answer. It was becoming clearer to me that I was more interested in the 'why' questions surrounding issues that qualitative research methods enabled me to find out.

However, I had picked up that quantitative research was also regarded as more 'rigorous' and of a higher status. At that stage I thought that doing research was about doing it correctly and properly and getting it 'right'. I saw little connection between how you framed and understood the 'problem' and the implications of those framings for how the data could be interpreted and for practices that might be useful in addressing the issues raised.

As I intimated earlier, my research questions came from my practices and my experiences as a feminist and as a lesbian teacher in a secondary school, and national political lobby groups queer teacher groups that I had co-established in the early 1990s such as GLEE. I undertook a M.Ed research project about the experiences of lesbian teachers, and for my M.Ed thesis, about the experiences of ten lesbian secondary school students. Talking with 'lesbian' teachers and 'lesbian' students raised questions around understanding what being a 'lesbian' meant. The participants in both projects understood this in a range of different ways, for some it was a political feminist stance that they had chosen, while others saw it as a biological sexual attraction over which they had no choice. Most of the students in particular actually changed how they defined their sexualities over the course of the project, several deciding that they were actually bisexual at that point, and one refused to be defined at all. Historical understandings of same sex desire as a personal pathology spilled over into the present in terms of how the students I interviewed had been understood. This was especially evident in how young lesbians were framed as being a minority group of 'at risk' students with a personal 'problem' who needed assistance from counsellors. Framing the students using such a deficit discourse constituted them as 'at risk' victims needing therapy (Quinlivan, 2004). It failed to recognise that they exercised extraordinary courage and resilience within institutions where they received verbal and physical harassment and intimidation from both students and in some cases staff. I realised that I had a theoretical problem, both in terms of framing lesbian and bisexual kids experiences in schools, and how the issues these students faced could be addressed.

Researching Across the Theory Practice Divide: An Ongoing Researcher's Journey

Still keen to address these issues I began a Ph.D in 1995. that looked, in the beginning anyway, at how to create a safe and inclusive school for lesbian and bisexual students. Again the same issues arose but this time within the context of a secondary school case study.

In terms of framing lesbianism and bisexuality I became increasingly interested in some writing that I had discovered in relation to what was being called queer theory (Britzman, 1995; Warner, 1993). There wasn't much of this around but it appeared to hold some exciting possibilities in terms of framing the 'problem' and addressing it. Drawing on post structural ideas the 'problem' was actually framed as the intractability of meanings of compulsory heterosexuality rather than lesbian and gay students themselves. Reframing the 'problem' in this way meant that the issues also had differing practice implications. Queer intentions related to destabilising the heterosexual norm, of asking the question, "When did you first know you were a heterosexual?", rather than "When did you first know you were a lesbian?". Sexuality was framed as being more fluid and less of a biological inevitability than a socially constructed meaning that was open to contestation and shifted and changed and moved over time and place. Attention was paid to understanding how meanings (or discourses) were drawn on to constitute understandings about sexuality and gender, and then could be critically engaged through discourse analysis to examine their implications. Heteronormative discourses as socially constructed understandings were seen as open to engagement and contestation through processes such as deconstruction (Caputo, 1997). In this way strategic change was possible, because in critically engaging with heteronormative and gender normative discourses, shifts in thinking and meaning could occur which could challenge heteronormativity, Unlike the modernist deficit discourses, it wasn't a done deal. This was pedagogically interesting to me, and seemed far more feasible than a revolution.

Perhaps of most value though, it was a way of framing the experiences of the lesbian and bisexual students that I was working with within the case study school as agentic and not as victims. I could show the ways in which they were both simultaneously constituted by heteronormative discourses within the school, while

also exercising agency to challenge them. I continue to be interested in the processes of subjectification, ways in which both students and teachers' constitute a sense of themselves through the discourses that are available to them, and how they engage with those discourses (Davies, 2006; Quinlivan, forthcoming).

Foucauldian analyses of power that informed much queer theoretical work were useful to me in framing power not as something that was possessed but that was exercised and could be productive (Foucault, 1980) This was a way to move away from the modernist oppression model that positioned the students as an oppressed and discriminated minority requiring reparation.

When it became apparent in the case study school that there were significant challenges in terms of valuing and affirming sexual diversity, Foucault's idea of using genealogy an approach to map the discourses (socially constructed understandings) that schools drew on to operate as heteronormalising institutions, and the effects the heteronormalising discourses had on the students, teachers and wider school communities, also proved useful in seeing me to the end of a project that had proved to be challenging for the school, the students that I worked with and for me as a researcher.

Foucault's genealogical intentions in mapping the ways that normalisation operates as a forms of controlling sectors of the population is far from a passive act. His intentions were actually very subversive. A genealogy can identify strategic points which can be 'pushed on' and 'stretched' in order to create openings for the understandings to shift and change and move, The theory then provided me with a way to actually see the project within the school to completion by treating everything that occurred as an interesting discursive encounter, which in the process of being enacted, was open to destabilisation and contestation (and therefore a venue within which understandings could shift and change and move).

However when I began to introduce notions to the school that framed heteronormativity as the issue that needed to be addressed, rather than making the school 'safe' for a minority group of lesbian and bisexual students within the school, the framework proved to be profoundly destabilising for most of the staff. They

were much happier with a deficit model so that the personal problem of the minority of students could be redirected to counsellors. In this way the major 'academic work' which the school framed as their primary role, could continue unimpeded. There were often angry and incensed reactions from many of the staff, and our interactions came to be marked by high degrees of emotionality.

I realised at this point that the strong emotional reactions that I was on the receiving end of provided some indication that the presence of the project in a school to affirm gender and sexual diversity operated to legitimate dangerous 'ways of knowing' which challenged the purposes of schooling (Quinlivan, 2007). The students I was working with on the other hand found the queer theoretical frameworks to be much more interesting and productive. While I felt quite vulnerable as a researcher within these encounters, I also realised that there was something going on here that was very important and which was to have an ongoing effect on my research work. Post structural feminist theory was useful in reiterating the importance of making researcher's positionality explicit in their work, rather than pretending to be neutral and objective (St Pierre, 2002). Emotionality and psychoanalytic frameworks for understanding what it means to learn and to teach emerged as an important site of learning in undertaking work in which 'learning to think otherwise' is a key component (Boler, 1999; Britzman, 2005; Taubman, 2006), and it needs to be worked more fully as a pedagogical site, rather than just framed as a difficulty that needs to be negotiated (Quinlivan, forthcoming). Such theoretical frameworks have significantly affected my understandings in ongoing research projects undertaken in schools (Quinlivan, 2004; forthcoming).

Another factor that working in the case study school towards affirming sexual and diversity was that the (shifting) intentions of the project introduced a dangerous form of knowledge into the school. Knowledges legitimating sexual diversity sat uncomfortably with the academic knowledges that were seen to be of a higher status within a school, that was seen to be already disadvantaged academically through its low decile intake. Many of the staff did not see addressing the diversity of students and engaging with social as well as academic outcomes to engage students in learning as the role as teachers, or as the role of the school. This was my

first introduction to the fact that the purposes of schooling are highly contested, and that from critical theoretical perspectives schools operate predominantly to reproduce the cultural capital of middle class communities (Apple, 2005). I also began to see that schools had very narrow frameworks in relation to knowledge and learning which seldom took into account a diverse range of students' talents and abilities (Nuthall, 2001). These factors drew my attention to the ways in which power and knowledge were inextricably intertwined, and that different knowledges possess different exchange values. This is what Foucault refers to as the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980) The use of these theoretical frameworks have significantly affected my understandings of what is possible to achieve in schools in partnerships given the differing exchange values of school and university knowledge in ongoing research projects undertaken in schools (Quinlivan, Boyask & Carswell, 2008).

The challenges that I faced in shifting schooling practices in the case study also read me into a greater understanding of the historical development of schooling and the fact that schools were never originally developed to do the work that they now needed in a 21st C context to do, however, in the case of secondary schools in particular, they are structured both institutionally (Skrtic, 1990) and ideologically (Powell & Barber, 2006) in a very similar way to when they were first developed in the 19th century to not only get children out of the workhouse but to also address issues of social control and maintain class distinctions. Through reading I developed an understanding of the ways in which schools as institutions are remarkably resistant to change (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) because of their way they operate as both machine and professional bureaucracies which are however decoupled from each other (Skrtic, 1990). So when school wants to appear as if it is changing something, that it can introduce it into the machine bureaucracy of the school, to make it appear as if change has been made. In reality however, the professional bureaucracy of the classroom remains unaffected (Skrtic, 1990). Increasingly I began to understand how both ideologically and structurally, the way that schooling, classroom, teaching and teacher education practices operate is often antithetical to reform (Kennedy, 2005).

Sitting in the back of classrooms for the first time as a researcher in this project, drew my attention to the huge amount of learning that was undertaken in the classroom between the students themselves that was often totally unseen and ignored by the teacher. The power of the hidden curriculum appeared to be much more pervasive and influential upon students' lives than the formal curriculum that the teacher proceeded with in the classroom (McGee, 1997). Talking with students about what school was like for them, also gave me a deep and rich understanding of the complexities of what the 'knowledge considered worth knowing was in schools and the ways in which the way that they were streamed and organised by the schooling system into ability bands severely affected their sense of themselves as learners (Nuthall, 2001; Quinlivan, 2006). Narrow notions of intelligence informed school structures which appeared to be hugely detrimental to many students sense of self worth and that severely affected their life opportunities. These insights informed later research that I undertook which focused on the important role that gender and diversity plays in influencing student learning. It has also informed an ongoing focus and interest in my work on talking to students about what enables learning for them in secondary school contexts, and on the hidden student peer curriculum in classroom contexts (Quinlivan, forthcoming). To this end theoretically I have never been able to totally embrace the post structural notion that analysing and shifting meanings at the discursive level is what change is all about. As well as providing analysis of the discursive regimes that shape peoples realities, the material realities that affect many of the young people I interview within schooling contexts need to be attended to as well. Interestingly contemporary feminist theory is now recognising that perhaps materiality needs to be paid more attention to (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). I am looking forwarding to exploring this theory more fully.

The Ph.D I ended up writing documented the shifts in conceptualising knowledge and learning and schooling that I had gone through in the six years of the project. As you can see these shifts were substantial and transformational. I was not the same person at the end of the six years. I had been placed in the position of having to think harder about what knowledge, learning and schooling meant. This was difficult and painful process for me, but also a very rich and interesting one. I

appeared to have learnt more as a result of the challenges and difficulties that I experienced over the course of the project that if it had been blisteringly successful.

Through engaging in ongoing research, reading and writing across the theory/practice divide in a New Zealand context, I continue to come against issues and challenges. From my positionalities as a researcher, and as an academic, I am still concerned with issues of practice, however increasingly it is theory I rely on to help me understand and account for the challenges.

Writing this position paper has provided me with some interesting insights into what it might mean to shift conceptualisations of knowledge and learning. Life experiences appear to have played a role in making me a person who questions. In many ways I am still that 14year old girl, arguing with my father at the kitchen table, still thinking that I can change the world... Attending to contexts, in terms of what is possible seems important (Atkinson, 2002) , as does timing, intuition, synchronicity, and valuing ways of knowing that are less quantifiable.

Returning to study provided me with an opportunity to having to think harder about what knowledge and learning mean, especially in institutional contexts like schools and universities. My life as an academic provides me with contexts within which I have extending and critical conversations around my ongoing work with people in a wide range of theory and practice contexts both nationally and internationally. Despite the high exchange value of academic knowledge, and the current instrumental academic climate which encourages a certain amount of rigidity and narrow critique, I have had, and continue to find, some extraordinarily wise and generous mentors and colleagues who enable me to stretch my thinking. I find these interactions, and my ongoing reading and writing helps my thinking to grow, one thought seems to lead to another and get taken then to a different level. Engaging in research that is relevant and meaningful to me with people that have a vision of what might be possible enables me to develop a learning self that is in a constant state of motion towards thinking differently (Ellsworth, 2005; Garvey-Berger, 2005)

While learning is often difficult, I have learnt to see that as a sign of my thinking being 'on the move'. It seems important to have some faith in the ongoing process (Garvey- Berger, 2005). Sometimes it feels like the more I open myself up to knowing, the more I can understand and yet also feel comfortable with not knowing. It is that openness that I want to continue to cultivate, because it's that which seems to enable my thinking to grow.

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