Understanding Teaching

Curriculum and the social context of schooling

Second edition

Edited by

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To Nancy Zillwood for her faith in me

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**Contributors**

**Acknowledgments**

**Introduction: Understanding teaching—Elizabeth Hatton**

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Teachers constitute a significant occupational group, particularly because, as Maclean and McKenzie (1991: 1) point out, 'teachers have a substantial effect on the nature of children's learning and schooling experience and so their life chances'. Teaching in most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries is the subject of scrutiny and debate. Indeed, Hughes (1991: 1) points out that education in the late 1970s and the 1980s was marked by unprecedented questioning and structural change. While this period was marked by an emphasis on quality as an educational goal, many of the resulting changes in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa were purely organisational changes, not focusing on teaching and curriculum as such (Codd 1991; Haberman 1991). The assumption appeared to be that changes in organisation would automatically improve educational quality. Other areas, including the interaction between teachers and pupils in classrooms, were relatively neglected.

In the late 1990s, attention is now focussed on teachers. One outcome of this focus is attention, including political attention, to the problematic status of teaching in Australia and New Zealand. Whether or not increased attention to the issue of status will ultimately impact on policy remains to be seen. Another important outcome of the shift of attention from structural change to teachers is that in both Australia and New Zealand there has been a significant interest in the issue of producing 'competent teachers' through teaching competencies. This issue is addressed in some detail in Chapter 5. However, at this point, it is worth saying that the capacity of this focus, on its own, to produce what the contributors to this text would count as 'good teaching' is questionable.

All children, the contributors would argue, deserve good teaching, which includes curriculum development aimed at improving student learning. Some children, however, can withstand mediocre teaching better than others. The closeness of the culture of their homes to the culture of the schools makes them less dependent on the schooling system and more immune to some of its worst features. Take the case of teaching reading. Students who come to school with significant experiences of reading are relatively unimpeded by teaching which presupposes that good reading is developed through the sequential application of isolated skills. By contrast, those who are totally dependent on the school for access to literacy and who try to follow teachers' instructions are likely to be severely handicapped. So, some children stand in greater need of good teaching than others. These are the children who are most dependent on the schooling system for access to school knowledge, and for access to the goods that come with the successful completion of schooling. They include those at the bottom end of the social scale in Australia and New Zealand (see, for example, Hatton,
Munns & Nicklin Dent 1996, Reading 16; Malin 1990, Reading 23; Cazden 1990, Reading 25, and Henry 1989, Reading 26). If teachers fail to see important differences between groups of students, then they are likely unintentionally to advantage some students while disadvantaging others. For example, Cazden (1990: 300) in a discussion of teachers' practices says 'in any society where groups have differential power, if teachers from the dominant group do what comes naturally, the result is apt to advantage children from their own group and disadvantage others'. So the relative neglect of curriculum and teaching by school reformers is puzzling. And it implies that preservice teacher education has a significant role to play in producing teachers who are able to collaborate with their colleagues to improve the quality of education for all students.

Educational theorists frequently provide devastating critiques of current educational ideology, practice or policy. While the contributors to this collection believe that such work is useful and necessary, they also acknowledge that those critiques which take no interest in, or merely hint at, how practice might be reoriented are not helpful to beginning teachers. Purposeful critique, on the other hand, can provide clear directions for teachers' practice. It can assist in the development of practice that might stand a better chance of working for socially just outcomes. Understanding Teaching: Curriculum and the Social Context of Schooling aims to provide critiques ultimately to improve practice. It brings together two groups of researchers whose interests are usually separate—curriculum researchers and foundations researchers. Its focus is on a better understanding of teaching on the part of beginning teachers through consideration of both curriculum and social issues. It presents a view of teaching as a social, political and ethical activity, which is not amenable to technical, recipe-like codification. (See Chapter 5 in which the competencies approach is criticised on these grounds.) It is written for an audience of preservice Australian and New Zealand teachers in the belief that better teaching will result from the presentation of teaching as a complex activity that requires constant critical reflection.

Some take the view that teaching should be simplistically presented for beginning teachers, and that its complexities, dilemmas and contradictions should remain unaddressed or even hidden until beginning teachers are 'ready' to address them (that is, when teachers have a few years' teaching experience and have put their survival concerns to rest). We challenge this view. We think it both demeaning and fundamentally wrong. For one thing, it undersells teaching as a form of work, which, if done well, is intellectually challenging and much more than mere mastery of technique. Moreover, the development of the subtle technique required to improve the quality of education is a far cry from what often passes for good teaching, and cannot be developed without a broad theoretical understanding of teaching.

Beginning teachers often perceive teacher educators as irrelevant and lacking in credibility, with little grasp of the realities of teaching (Turney & Wright 1991; Hatton 1994). They do so for at least two reasons. First, because the codified, simplistic version of teaching presented to them in preservice preparation is far removed from the complex reality they encounter when they enter schools. Second, because they are not given opportunities to develop the characteristics that they actually require for the complex work of teaching.

These characteristics include enjoyment of intellectual struggle; critical reflection on policy, practice, curricula and the like; the formulation of adequate, justifiable educational goals; and the capacity to choose strategies appropriate for achieving their goals (see Chapters 6–9). The view taken in this book is that, while it is never too late for teachers to acquire these characteristics, pupils in New Zealand and Australia would benefit if teachers had them from the outset. So, we reject the view of teacher preparation which suggests that the full complexity of teaching ought not be addressed until preservice students have allayed their survival concerns. This book aims to develop, from the outset, knowledge bases and
characteristics appropriate to reflective teachers who are concerned with providing worthwhile learning experiences for all students.

There are three parts to this book covering, respectively, teaching, curriculum, and social issues. Throughout, teachers are taken to be active agents in curriculum change and development whose work necessarily involves social justice. Since teachers’ work affects people’s life chances, teachers should be prepared to examine policies, school contexts, curricula and pedagogies in terms of equity and equality of opportunity (see Chapter 10 for a case in which this does not seem to happen; see also Hatton, Munns & Nicklin Dent, Reading 16).

Part 1 is titled ‘Teaching’. Chapter 1, ‘Social and Cultural Influences on Teaching’, introduces the idea that teaching is shaped by conservative influences that are often unrecognised by teachers. Elizabeth Hatton suggests that unequal outcomes from schooling in Australia and New Zealand require teachers to address the way in which their own biographies, and the social and material circumstances they encounter in their work situations, contribute to those outcomes.

In Chapter 2, ‘The Curriculum and Teaching’, Shirley Grundy challenges the traditional ‘syllabus view’ of curriculum, which suggests that it is developed, handed down, implemented and received in a non-interactive way. Grundy argues that curriculum should properly be perceived as a construction in which ‘all participants in the educational process’, including students and teachers, ‘are actively involved’. This ‘pedagogical view’ of curriculum makes curriculum development a central feature of teachers’ work. Given this, teachers have an obligation to include in their curriculum work the development of defensible justifications for their educational strategies (Liston & Zeichner 1991) since, as Grundy argues, the ‘act of teaching is always an act of curriculum construction’.

In Chapter 3, ‘Neutrality and the Value-ladenness of Teaching’, Robert Elliot and Elizabeth Hatton argue that the view that teachers ought to attempt to be value-neutral in their work is both unachievable and misconceived. They present a view of teaching as an inevitably value-laden activity. They argue that reflecting on debates about values and recognising the political dimension of teachers’ work are likely to improve teachers’ practice. Moreover, they suggest that teachers are thereby better positioned to meet the goals endorsed by the state (such as the provision of equal opportunity for all students regardless of factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity, rurality, sexuality and so on). They describe what happens when the political dimension of teachers’ work is overlooked and it is misunderstood as a neutral, technical activity.

Appeals to social justice are often made in educational policies. Given this, teachers require an understanding of social justice so as to comprehend and evaluate policy and to implement just practices. In Chapter 4, ‘Social Justice and the Provision of Education’, Elizabeth Hatton and Robert Elliot present social justice as a contested concept, acknowledging that there are competing accounts of what social justice is. They discuss Rawls’s theory of justice, showing how it is developed, and how it might be criticised and defended. Rawls’s theory is a useful one for teachers since it is a liberal theory of justice, and liberal theories often shape contemporary educational policy. And since Rawls’s theory is often appealed to by educational writers and policy makers alike, the authors analyse a particular educational policy in terms of Rawlsian social justice. There is also some consideration of students’ rights to a liberal education and teachers’ roles in relation to nonsexist, nonracist, nonheterosexist and nonclassist pedagogy and curriculum.

In Chapter 5, ‘Competent Teachers’, Elizabeth Hatton draws attention to contestations about competent teaching and the impact of these contestations upon initial teacher education in New Zealand and Australia. The hegemonic view of competent teaching enshrined in the competency approach is critically examined. Beginning teachers are encouraged to comply strategically (that is, to the extent that existing power relations make it sensible to
so do) with this approach rather than accept that competencies tell the whole story about competent teaching.

Shirley Grundy, Joan Warhurst, David Laird and Tom Maxwell collaborated to write Part 2, ‘Curriculum’. In Chapter 6, ‘Interpreting the Curriculum’, Grundy et al. take up the theme that curriculum is not value-neutral; they suggest that it typically represents hegemonic values. They refer to value systems as discourses, and use a framework of common curriculum discourses (Kemmis, Cole & Suggett 1983, Reading 11) to show how policies and practices might be analysed to make their implicit value systems explicit. They argue that informed teachers need to articulate their value positions in relation to policy and to identify where these coincide or diverge from policy. This exercise, Grundy et al. suggest, may result in resistance, compromise or contestation, but whatever the result, the authors believe it is ‘incumbent upon professional educators to be able to rationally explain or defend [their] educational practices’.

In Chapter 7, ‘Curriculum Contestation’, Laird et al. suggest that the policies which shape curriculum reflect a range of different value positions. There are currently a number of curriculum contests including debate about the purposes of education and the relevance of the curriculum. These indicate the need for teachers to engage in critical reflection so as to inform the decisions they make in their day-to-day work.

In Chapter 8, ‘Curriculum Development’, Warhurst et al. develop the implications of the ‘pedagogical view’ of curriculum; a view which, while not denying the importance of syllabi and policies, ‘acknowledges the central place of both teachers and students in actively engaging with the content and the processes of learning in the construction of the curriculum’. This view of curriculum development is constructivist; it represents curriculum development as a dynamic, ongoing process in which Schwab’s (1969) four commonplaces of teaching (milieu, subject matter, students and teachers) exert powerful influences on the teaching/learning process. Policy context and the social and cultural context are crucial aspects of milieu to which teachers need to attend. Informed teachers, Warhurst et al. argue, are in a position to take advantage of the opportunities they find when they analyse policy. The authors caution that ‘teachers have an obligation to take into account policy directions and [to] engage in debate and deliberation about the effects of these policies on their work’. They also suggest that teaching is not a technology to be applied similarly in different sites and that the ‘way in which a curriculum [is] developed and improved is context dependent’. Teachers are unlikely to experience success and support for curriculum development if they fail to recognise this; hence the need for careful thought at the level of planning and implementation if curriculum improvement is the goal.

As far as subject matter policy is concerned, Warhurst et al. contend that current policy documentation ‘allows and encourages professional initiative’ in curriculum development. Effective curriculum development also demands that teachers be researchers of their students’ learning. Teaching that does not result in learning is a fake commodity (Woods 1990)—Warhurst et al. argue that the examination of teaching practices is integral to curriculum development. Finally, they claim that if curriculum development is to be adequately defended or advocated, it must be both systematic and rational. Careful, reflective attention to the four commonplaces of teaching will go a long way towards ensuring its rationality. Its systematic nature can be ensured by making curriculum development planned development which is thoughtfully interpreted. Ideally it is tied to action and the action is monitored. Warhurst et al. advocate individual and collaborative action research as a means of ensuring systematic curriculum development.

In Chapter 9, ‘Curriculum Evaluation’, Maxwell et al. take evaluation to be ‘a judgment about the worth of something’. This involves the values of the evaluator(s) and appropriate evidence on which to base judgments (which requires elaboration of what that something is or ought to be). They argue that students’ work, the adequacy of the curriculum and
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teachers’ work constitute the objects of useful evaluation. Attention to only one or two aspects is unlikely to adequately promote improvement. The authors argue that in the evaluation of students’ work (assessment), it is important that teachers recognise their professional obligation to make judgments of meaning on raw test data and that they communicate these judgments, rather than raw scores, to parents. Raw scores on standardised tests, they caution, are subject to a number of biases of which teachers concerned with just practice need to be aware. Evaluation of the adequacy of the curriculum needs to take account of Schwab’s (1969) four commonplaces of teaching. Again it is crucial that teachers clearly recognise the important interactions between them. Evaluation of teachers’ work, Maxwell et al. argue, should properly be made by teachers, not outside experts. This is not to suggest there is no role for outsiders in the evaluation of teachers’ work. Indeed, the authors advocate ‘action evaluation’, utilising an outsider as a facilitator, as a form of professional development for whole staff evaluation. Evaluation of teachers’ work, whether individual or collaborative, involves critical questioning aimed at developing increased understandings. This in turn provides a broadened basis for subsequent decision making and action. Given the complex, nontechnical nature of teachers’ work, curriculum evaluation necessarily involves teachers in studying their own work (Stenhouse 1975: 143).

In Part 3, ‘Social issues’, the connection between social justice, curriculum and teaching is central. A clear analytic grasp on a number of social issues, such as social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity (including issues relating to the education of indigenous people), geographical location and school–community relations, together with a knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the relevant policy documents, is crucial to a teacher’s capacity to facilitate worthwhile learning for all. Study of these issues demonstrates how social disadvantage is produced and in the absence of appropriate practice, such as teacher and curricula responses, reproduced.

In Chapter 10, ‘Exclusion: A Case Study’, Elizabeth Hatton presents a case study that draws together many of the concerns of Understanding Teaching. The study documents the social mechanisms leading to the expulsion from schooling of a young girl of Maori/pakeha parentage in a country school in New Zealand. It illustrates the complex interaction of class, race, ethnicity, gender and geographic location in producing a situation in which a bright, lively student is excluded from the schooling system and from the opportunities that a well-educated young person has. It also shows how a decentralised system, which was implemented by the government in New Zealand to achieve equity, might give powerful parents the means to increase their control over the schooling system at the expense of less powerful parents.

In Chapter 11, ‘Social Class, Policy and Teaching’, Rachel Sharp argues that teachers need to make a realistic appraisal of what is achievable in a class-divided market society. She documents changes in orientations in the Australian Disadvantaged Schools Program, a long-term social justice initiative, and makes a case for curriculum work that gives school students the capacity to critically and reflectively analyse their own society.

In Chapter 12, ‘Gender, Policy and Teaching’, Bronwyn Davies gives an account of changes in gender policy. She argues that if teachers are to do useful work in the gender area, they require a grasp of the processes by which individuals become gendered. Implications for practice are developed out of this analysis.

In Chapter 13, ‘Sexuality, Policy and Teaching’, Elizabeth Hatton, Kate Maher and Simon Swinson consider the fate of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered students in the heterosexist institution of schooling. The authors suggest that this social justice issue (which currently receives little attention in either preservice or inservice teacher education) is one that teachers cannot continue to ignore. Hatton, Maher and Swinson outline the nature and scope of the problem and suggest some ways in which teachers might make the curriculum and school more supportive and fair and therefore more inclusive.
In Chapter 14, ‘Multiculturalism, Policy and Teaching’, Michael Singh argues that existing curricula are shaped to serve the interests of a privileged few. He develops an argument for an inverted curriculum as a means of offering cultural and intellectual advancement for all, since an inverted curriculum embodies, rather than marginalises, the interests of the disadvantaged.

In Chapters 15 and 16 attention turns to education of Australia’s and New Zealand’s indigenous peoples. In both countries indigenous people are fighting a legacy of colonialism and paternalism, and attempting to address serious educational and social problems. In Chapter 15, ‘Aboriginal Education, Policy and Teaching’, Merridy Malin presents a history of institutionalised racism in education in Australia. She outlines initiatives in education that have been hard won by Aboriginal people and outlines some strategies that non-Aboriginal teachers might adopt to make schooling more productive for Aboriginal students in urban settings. In Chapter 16, ‘Maori Education, Policy and Teaching: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally’, Kathleen Irwin shows how the most successful developments in Maori education today are based on the ‘complex, vibrant Maori education system’ which was in place before colonisation. Irwin argues that while mainstream schooling ‘serves Maori poorly’, ‘Maori schooling serves Maori very well’.

In Chapter 17, ‘Rural Education, Policy and Teaching’, Ken Stevens argues that geography acts as a social stratifier. This stratification is complicated by issues of class, gender, ethnicity and the like. Stevens suggests that new distance education technologies have the potential to overcome some of the educational problems brought about by geographic isolation.

In Chapter 18, ‘School, Parents and Community, Policy and Teaching’, Izabel Soliman treats school–community relations as a social justice issue and argues that much can be done to improve school–community relations, and thereby learning outcomes for all students.

In the concluding chapter, ‘Just Teaching’, Robert Elliot, Elizabeth Hatton and Michael Singh draw together some of the themes of Understanding Teaching. They argue, in particular, that teachers should be concerned with just teaching, with practices that are consistent with, and which promote, social justice.

Thus Understanding Teaching is concerned to present a view of education in general and teaching in particular which is guided by a conception of social justice. We attempt to show throughout the text that thinking about what social justice involves and working through its practical implications is integral to good teaching—that is, teaching capable of enhancing the life chances of those who experience it. While the view we present is obviously complex and challenging, we hope it is one that will assist beginning teachers to acquire or further develop the reflective, analytic and humane dispositions necessary for any effective teacher.

Part 1, ‘Teaching’, provides the conceptual framework for the book and thereby sets the scene for the subsequent parts. These parts, ‘Curriculum’ and ‘Social Issues’, do not, however, need to be addressed in a linear fashion. Readers might find it useful to move back and forth between ‘Curriculum’ and ‘Social Issues’. Moreover, readers might find it helpful on occasion to revisit particular chapters in Part 1. While the contributing authors share a commitment to just teaching, their positions on various issues are not necessarily the same. Consider, for example, the view of competencies as technicising and atomising evident in Chapter 5 with the broader view presented in Chapter 7. These differences are evidence of the contested nature of educational issues. Readers are advised to adjudicate carefully between the two positions. Note too that most chapters are followed by one or more designated reading(s). (Where appropriate, readers are also referred to Readings that accompany other chapters.) Their purpose is to give readers more background to the issues under discussion. Sometimes the readings develop and extend the arguments of the various chapters, and sometimes they present a contrasting view that should be considered.
INTRODUCTION

1. As a reminder of New Zealand’s ‘dual cultural heritage’ (New Zealand Department of Education 1989: 5) we adopt the convention of naming in both English and Maori on the first usage in each chapter. In Chapter 16, ‘Maori education, policy and teaching: Thinking globally, acting locally’, Aotearoa is used more often.

References


