Connecting career education with social justice: relating theory to practice in New Zealand secondary schools

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Introduction

This short article provides an overview of my PhD, discusses a number of key issues that have guided my thinking in the development and design of my study, outlines how I will be doing the fieldwork, and explores how the findings might connect career education with social justice.

Developing my PhD study: a personal reflection

As I developed my research I found myself thinking about my own life history. This led to a reflexive exploration of my own conceptions of career and career education, and why I feel social justice is important. Being critically reflexive helped me become more aware of the ways in which I ascribed meaning(s) and value(s) to the multiple perspectives within the literature, and how my past history, and present situation informed and shaped the issues, concerns and challenges identified. I adopted poststructural feminist conventions by writing myself into the text (Jones, 1992; Lincoln and Denzin, 2000), acknowledging that as 'I' write and research reflexively these are not the views of a disconnected 'other', but a representation of my own understanding of the world, infused by my (sometimes contradictory and shifting) values.

Focusing the research

Career education bridges the divide between compulsory schooling and the wider social, economic and political world. It is concerned with enabling students to manage their future lives effectively (Ministry of Education, 2009). Yet little attention has been paid to where social justice 'fits', either in the international literature (see Guichard, 2001), or in reviews of practice in New Zealand (see Vaughan and Gardiner, 2007; Watts, 2007). Therefore I developed my PhD around the central question: 'How is social justice understood within career education in New Zealand secondary schools?'

In my study I am exploring whether career education policy and practice is socially inclusive, culturally sensitive, critically informed and politically dynamic. Drawing on Young's (1990) concept of the five faces of oppression, which is informed by critical social theory (see Anyon, 2009), my aim is to: 1) explore how career educators understand social justice; 2) examine how policy informs practice; 3) interrogate 'common sense' explanations of 'career'; and 4) identify the multiple discourses that currently inform career education theory and practice in New Zealand secondary schools.

Overview of the literature
Conceptualising career(s)

Inkson (2007) suggests that career is a key signifier of individual identity, and occupies a central position within our lives. This coalesces with Young and Collin's (2000) view that 'career can be seen as an overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual's life' (p.5). If this is so, then how 'career' is conceptualised and understood requires careful consideration. The contemporary constructivist paradigm presents a view of career as a process of self-construction through which people give meaning to their own individual 'career' paths (Collin, 2000).

Yet a closer reading of the literature highlights that the language of career, and how it is defined, is often confused (Richardson, 1993), with the term 'work' frequently used to signify paid employment (Haworth and Lewis, 2005). Moreover, economic participation appears to be privileged, with human value measured in relation to this. This raises questions concerning those who are not active in the labour market (see Irving, 2005). Should they be regarded as 'careerless' (Collin, 1996) for example, the insignificant 'other' to the economically productive subject (Dyer, 2006)? In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education (2009) acknowledges that career can encompass a range of life roles, and that 'everyone has a career' (p.6). Therefore in my research I am looking at how career education policies, and career educators themselves, conceptualise and give meaning to the notion of 'career'.

Career education or career development?

Whilst McCowan and McKenzie (1997) assert that career education practice is based on career theory, Harris (1999) challenges this, suggesting that the concept of career *education* is not only under-theorised, but also contested. New Zealand research by Vaughan and Gardiner (2007) also found that career education lacked conceptual clarity in schools. More noticeable perhaps is the drift in terminology from the language of career *education* to that of career *development*, with the terms being used

synonymously in the literature (see Patton, 2001). This conflation is at risk of confusing learning *about* career in an educational sense, with preparation *for* career in relation to competency acquisition. Learning *about* career might engage students in critical discussion and examination of how social, economic and political concerns contribute to the formation of a 'career' identity (Irving, 2009), inform notions of citizenship (Hyslop-Margison and McKerracher, 2008), impacts on how social justice is understood (Irving, in press), and plays out in the labour market (Hyslop-Margison and Armstrong, 2004). Preparation *for* career lends itself to a focus on the preparation of students to take self-responsibility for their futures by gaining the 'flexible' skills, attitudes, instrumental knowledge, and competence(s) that will enable them to obtain and retain employment in an uncertain (economic) world (see McMahon, Patton and Tatham, 2003).

As a small exporting nation, New Zealand responded to the global challenges of the 1980s by embracing neoliberal economic reforms (Kelsey, 1997), placing importance on the notion 'that each one makes a 'continual enterprise' of ourselves' (Olssen, 1996:340). Career education in New Zealand therefore needs to be understood within this broader context. According to the Ministry of Education (2009) career education should concern itself with the development of 'career management competencies which will assist [individual students] to manage their lives' (p.6). This issue has particular salience for my own research where I am exploring *which* theory (or theories) influence policy and inform practice, and how government objectives shape the focus. I am also interested in learning how *career educators* decide what should be included/excluded, and whether (or how) it prepares young people for a critical engagement *with* life.

Locating social justice in career education

As mentioned earlier, there has been little research concerning how social justice is understood within career education, or where social justice concerns 'fit'. The term social justice is often loosely applied, lacking clarity and definition (Sandretto, 2004), thus leaving it open to multiple interpretations. Thrupp and Tomlinson (2005) note, 'like 'equality of opportunity' or 'choice', 'social justice' is one of those politically malleable and essentially contested phrases which can mean all things to all people' (p.549). Where issues of 'social justice' have emerged within the career education literature in New Zealand these have tended to focus on 'equality of access', the need for individuals to overcome personal 'deficits', challenges to gender stereotyping and issues *for* Maori and Pacific Island students (see Ministry of Education, 2009; Vaughan and Gardiner, 2007).

Thus, at the heart of my study, I am interested in knowing how social justice is understood within career education in New Zealand secondary schools. How are social justice concerns positioned within policy, are issues of social justice located (and addressed) within practice, and are there contradictions, resistances and silences?

Methodology and method

The chosen methodology and method has been guided by an interpretivist paradigm which is concerned with the nature of knowing and an understanding of how 'reality' is socially constructed, negotiated and conceptualised. Interpretivism is embedded within qualitative research and sees social reality as a web of 'complex and interwoven variables' (Davidson and Tolich, 1999:28), through which human beings make sense of their lives as they interact 'within' their world(s). A further feature relates to the view that certainty, 'truth', and naturally occurring 'facts' should be regarded as partial and unstable referents. Finally, interpretivism identifies language, through discourse, as playing a central role in the shaping and informing of individual and social worldviews.

Reflecting the socially constructed nature of qualitative inquiry, Patton (2002) poses the following key questions: 'How have the people in this setting constructed reality? What are their reported perceptions, 'truths', explanations, beliefs and worldview? What are the consequences of their constructions for their behaviours and those with whom they interact?' (p. 132). With reference to my study these questions provide a useful focus as I explore: how the 'real world' is constructed in policy documents and by career educators themselves; what has influenced career educators' understanding of social justice *and* career education; finally, how this understanding has shaped their behaviours and social practices in relation to what is considered to be 'valued knowledge', particularly with regards to career preparation and the place of social justice.

I have adopted a qualitative approach as this is an interactive form of inquiry, locating the researcher within the world(s) of the researched. It operates at the contested borders between reality and representation, engaging with complex and contradictory values, knowledge(s), truth claims and experiences (Davidson and Tolich, 1999). As a method it will enable me to gain an insight into the multilayered lives of participants through direct interaction with them, thus facilitating the gathering of rich data.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be used to make sense of the data as it is politically and socially informed. CDA focuses on the ways in which language is implicated in the construction of meaning(s), and (re)presents multiple, and at times contradictory, discourses. Drawing from a poststructural perspective, CDA rejects the notion of the fixed or unified subject, with the researchers gaze focused on an examination of way(s) in which discourses are utilised to present 'common sense' truths and (partial) representations of how things are, thus providing opportunities to consider how things might be (Luke, 1995-96). My analysis therefore is not simply concerned with indentifying 'obvious' discourses, but also those that

may lie beneath the surface. CDA provides a critical lens through which textual material can be analysed in relation to what is said, how language is employed, and what is omitted. It will contribute to an uncovering and examination of the beliefs, values and social practices that inhabit career education, and contribute to a more complex understanding of how social justice is understood within this curriculum area.

Work in the field

Having gained ethical approval from the University my fieldwork begins with an analysis of the career education policy produced by the Ministry of Education (2009). This will provide an insight into current official thinking concerning the concept of career, the role of career education, and how social justice issues are positioned and understood. I also intend to analyse the policies of the Careers And Transition Educators Association (Aotearoa) (CATE) and the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ), the professional bodies that encompass career educators.

Moving on to the school-based aspect, I am currently in the process of sending a letter and information sheet about the study to a number of principals asking whether they would be interested in allowing their school's career educator to participate in the study. Those who agree will be asked to provide copies of their school's policies and programmes that relate to career education and social justice for analysis. The data from this will provide a broader context for the study by contributing to a collective overview of how the participant schools position social justice in general, and in their career education policies and programmes more specifically. It will also provide an insight into the focus of the localised school-based policies and programmes. Using semi-structured questions, I plan to interview approximately 18 career educators in secondary schools, in both urban and rural areas, who are responsible for the development and delivery of career education. Here I will explore with the participants how they understand concepts of career, career education, and social justice, and how they relate this understanding to their policies and practices. Once the initial findings emerge, I will circulate these to all of my participants and ask for their comments and observations which will be used to inform the final version.

As a means of making theory useful and practice informed (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1988), I am planning to develop a critically informed social justice framework for use in New Zealand secondary schools. This framework will explore 'critical' social justice concerns in relation to how social, economic and political discourses position and shape concepts of 'self', 'work', 'career', 'opportunity', and 'justice'. Working collaboratively with research participants who wish to engage at this deeper level, and with representatives from career organisations (such as Careers Services, CATE and CDANZ), the primary goal of the framework will be to provide career educators with a

resource that enables them to reflexively engage with the social justice issues and concerns that are identified, and to consider these within the context of their own localised situations. In support of the framework I envisage the development of a strategy, supported by curriculum ideas, and examples of 'good practice' (where possible), that identifies ways in which a critical understanding of social justice might be incorporated into career education (and cross-curricular) practice. The aim is not to produce a prescribed learning package, but present ideas and possibilities, underpinned by precepts of social justice that are critically informed, and might be applied in localised settings. I anticipate that the framework will also provide a foundation for the future development of curriculum materials and resources (subject to funding) that will support career educators who wish to incorporate 'critical' social justice approaches within their career education practice(s).

Conclusion: connecting career education with social justice

As a critical researcher for social justice in education (see Griffiths, 1998) I have endeavoured to ensure that the principles of justice, fairness, recognition and inclusion are evident throughout all aspects of my research design. More specifically I have incorporated a collaborative approach that opens up opportunities for participants to contribute to the (re)co-construction of knowledge. Finally, I plan to construct my findings, and develop the proposed framework, as part of a multivocal and dialogical process in which the voices of participants are heard.

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