

Praxis in Education in the South Pacific

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Praxis can be traced back to Aristotle who believed that in practical arts like ethics and education, theory must be rooted in practice. Praxis is therefore the merging of practice and theory.

Phronesis which refers to the disposition 'to act truly and rightly' was considered important in Aristotle's time (Carr and Kemmis, 1983: 33-34). Practice was seen as the yardstick for knowledge as thought and action were considered equally important. The concept of *poto* (Helu-Thaman, 1992) is one that I would say is the Pacific equivalent of phronesis. This highlights the notion that what constitutes knowledge is not static nor universal. What Tongans may value and regard as knowledge could be quite different from what, for example, a white Australian may regard as important.

With advances in science and technology particularly in the late nineteenth century, the relationship between practice and theory was reversed. Science with its objectivity and technicality espoused theory as the ultimate in knowledge; hence practice was simply a technicality which should conform to the theory.

The science boom spread to the social sciences which adopted the clinical, cold rationality that characterises the physical sciences. In other words, the methods used for research and application in the inanimate world were applied to the humanities where the objects/subjects of study were people.

The early critical theorists such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse (see Gibson, 1986) re-acted to this positivism in the social sciences. They propounded that a rational, technical approach was inappropriate in the humanities. Critical theory has since expanded and taken on a new direction

but basically it sets the foundation for modern day praxis.

Praxis in education should begin in the classroom. It is the practitioner (the teacher) who should play a vital role in the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of educational policy research. This has implications for action research.

The teacher, as participant and actor in the classroom, has first-hand experience of what theorists can only play around with on the drawing board. Who better can educational research depend on for practical expertise than the teacher?

The current situation in some countries, for instance, is that educational policies are made at the national level, with virtually no input from the practitioners. The curriculum, the pedagogy and the mechanism of evaluation are outside the control of the practitioner (except perhaps in the case of the innovative teacher who risks antagonising administrators whose sole aim seems to be the implementation and 'policing' of policies).

Praxis in education, especially in the South Pacific, needs to be encouraged. The top-down approach typical of curriculum development in some countries is not conducive to encouraging the reflective practitioner in the classroom and should be phased out. Education should be seen as a partnership between society, its people and the practitioners (teachers/educators). This of course has many implications for education in the South Pacific.

The importation of educational curriculum with its pedagogy in hook, line and sinker fashion is a practice that must (and should) challenge the conscience of 'educators'.

Practitioners must question the relevance of such packages! Is the package relevant/appropriate? Whose values are being promoted? Does it consider the social setting of the people who will use it?

Praxis places a lot of importance on the practitioner. The practitioner must have the ability to document and make sensible judgements about the practice of education and whether the educational theories on which they are founded are of benefit to the people they purport to serve. The action researcher/teacher must also have the courage and the ability to communicate effectively with the policy makers. The researcher's mastery of language (whatever it may be) must effectively create and maintain dialogue with the people/agencies concerned.

In policy research, the researcher who is grounded on praxis cannot be insensitive to the social implications of what he/she witnesses in the real situations. The policy researcher must also take a stand on policies researched. Not to do so would mean an acceptance of the ideologies on which so many of our Pacific Island schools appear to

be founded. This includes the perpetuation of the class system, elitism, capitalism and maintenance of hegemony.

Education has never been apolitical and educational researchers will find themselves having to espouse lines of thinking that they are morally and ethically inclined to do. With praxis, researchers are in a position to hear the story of the "silent people". Praxis is reality-based and action-based and has significant implications for researchers in education in the South Pacific and for curriculum implementation.

References

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