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ABSTRACT

I want to address the political element in the pedagogical engagement. Too often the business of teaching is presented as somehow independent of political influence or implication. When ERO talked about 'delivering the curriculum', the terminology reflected a very neo-liberal view that the curriculum was something different from the process of teaching and that teachers should be regarded as functionaries putting out there something decided by others. In this paper I want to look at the political element of pedagogy, both as a question of Foucault's 'conduct of conduct', and as a process inseparable from the very political elements of sexism, racism, classism that pervade our society and are therefore inescapable in our classrooms. In considering the element of racism or ethnicism I will look at the ontologies we bring to our work, and how they might differ. Ultimately I will bring Levinas into the story, to help to consider how our teaching can be politically and ethically aware.

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Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou, ma Talofa lava, ma Malo e lelei, kia orana, namaste, bula. Warm greetings to you all. It's a special privilege for me to address so many of my friends and colleagues here today. A kind of poroporoaki, I think.

For those who do not know me, a kind of pepeha. I was born in England and came here as a toddler. I became a high school History teacher, with a keen interest in the education of Māori and Samoan students. I started teaching in the 1970s, when the education of Maori and Pacific students was not taken as seriously as it is now. Over the years I've been a teacher educator and a graduate supervisor, and have a considerable amount of experience in the supervision of Māori and Pacific doctoral theses.

A word or two about the content of this address. Since, as a good postie, I take the suspicion of grand narratives seriously, this is a very petite narrative. It has an auto-ethnographic form if we are going to be technical, but is actually more like a rambling review of my own thoughts on pedagogy and the politics that have accompanied my forms of pedagogy over the years. I apologise to our Australian and Asian members: this paper is firmly located in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A couple of years ago I wrote a paper for a Festschrift for Roger Dale on the 'Irreducible Minimum of Pedagogy' (Devine, 2020), a title drawn from Dale's 1994 paper, 'The McDonaldisation of Education...' in which I explored the relationship between the teacher and student from two major angles. The first was as pedagogy as a form of resistance to neo-liberal pressures on

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teachers to perform as functionaries, the second was as a way of exploring the contributions that various thinkers from the western canon, and from Māori and Pacific worlds which have made their way into my thinking about pedagogy.

In this paper I want to turn more outwards as it were: to decrease the emphasis on the personal relationship, although that will come into play, and to explore more the context and the implications of pedagogic relationships. That is to say, to consider the conduct of conduct, the political and ethical considerations that inform pedagogy and which form its web of consequences.

The noble ideal of the good teacher

Many studies—I can refer to Te Kotahitanga and to more recent studies of absenteeism—refer to the significance of a ‘good’ relationship between the student and the teacher. But few studies actually tell a teacher what this ‘good’ relationship consists in, and how it is to be achieved. Not a few teachers wobble off the sides of this ideal relationship either into attempting to be either too close or too distant. So I think it is worth considering what this mysterious relationship might be, might look like, might constitute.

Those of you who know me—and there are many of you! will know that my constant questions—maybe even obsessions—have been with political theory, and with pedagogy. In this address I am going to try to bring the two together, There may be no point in doing this: the two may be irreconcilable! And I certainly am not advocating a kind of educational system that will integrate the two! But, for reasons of my own, I want to look at the interface, or rather the interaction, between the pedagogic and the political.

My interest in this long predates my involvement in philosophy of education. Indeed for me, the charm of philosophy of education is precisely that it operates in that interface, at the jointure of philosophy and ‘actualite’, the world of experience.

I’m going to give this talk in narrative form, almost auto-ethnographic, because this form, it seems to me, allows me to be as cranky as I like. You will of course be aware that as fully paid-up subscriber to post-structuralism/post modernism, I don’t guarantee the truth of any of my observations, except that they seem true to me at a particular moment in time. I apologise in advance for shocking generalisations and essentialization: you can all argue with me later.

When I was a student in Teachers’ College We were taught Piaget, and Behaviour Modification. And that was it—the major focus was on the curriculum, and when you think about it, curricula come and go but pedagogy is almost immortal. On practicum, I was pretty appalled—even though I knew or should have known to expect it by the treatment of and attitudes towards Māori and Pacific young people in our schools.

Jocular disparagement

The racism was usually covert—and masked by a kind of exasperated concern, or condescending good intentions, often taking the form of ostensibly humorous denigration.

In my first West Auckland school I had classes of working class students, pakeha, migrant Maori, immigrant Pasifika, mostly but not all Samoan. I realized that despite my diploma in teaching I really did not know how to teach them. This was my first mistake, to think that it was up to me to ‘teach’ as in ‘instruct’, and I quickly had to learn otherwise. I tried to address the needs of each child—and remember a secondary school teacher teaches about 150 students in a week. I remember asking an inspector—in those days inspectors were meant to give helpful advice—how to deal with strategies for dealing with individual needs in such diversity—and she quickly remembered she had a hair appointment.

So really to find a pedagogy that acknowledged difference I was thrown on my own resources. I learnt to communicate by worksheet, and to put everyone into groups—and to stop ‘teaching’.

Fortunately at this time I discovered Paulo Freire. The magic bullet, for me, was ‘ask the oppressed’. This is a complex instruction, because it involves a political assessment about acknowledging privilege in relation to the ‘oppressed’, but also it acknowledges the knowing of the oppressed, a position endorsed by Foucault (1972). I never looked back. Positioning myself as learner as well as teacher opened for me the amazing worlds of Maori and Pacific cultures, particularly that of Samoa. And it changed my teaching entirely.

In my first job at a West Auckland school I was employed as a reliever, teaching economics and typing. Typing was ok—my mother, practical woman that she was, had insisted I learn to type as a failsafe career option. But economics! I knew nothing about that. The class I had was the second string fifth form, a collection basically of all the students who were not going to pass the exam (‘School Certificate’ in those days). The Head of Department would pop in at the beginning of class, set up the work—‘answer the questions on page 66’ and go back to his own class, the ones who were expected to pass. Obviously my class were predominantly Pacific, and obviously got very bored, very quickly. So I set up a deal with them: they would work on page 66 for 40 min, and then spend the last 10 min of the class time teaching me about Samoa and Pacific culture. They took to this with extreme enthusiasm. Now, at the time I was thinking in terms of Applied Behaviour Modification, with the tutoring as the motivator, but the question is, why did they find this opportunity to tutor an ignorant palagi so rewarding? I think it was precisely because I was ignorant and prepared to learn, and they were busting to explain to someone, anyone, at the school who they were and why their beliefs and values were so different. This is perhaps an instance of what Levinas means when he talks about ‘hearing’ the other. Philosophically speaking this was more than an eye-opener: here were people who not only, as Tamasese et al. (1997) say, were not individuals, an immediate and real rebuttal of classic western thought about individualism, but they were people to whom Descartes had never happened. This is different to being in Cartesian recovery!.

There were political consequences for becoming so engaged with Māori and Pacific thought: the general perception was that they were somehow deficient—and that this deficiency was somehow contagious. My status as a teacher was definitely in jeopardy. It was probably only my Master’s degree that saved me, but as it was I was allocated difficult classes, and a prefab at the edge of the playing fields. However, my Polynesian education continued, and I evolved ways of teaching that bypassed the individualism inherent in the school system—using group work and learning and using what was important and understood by my students, particularly with regard to language, and especially to the use of comprehensible metaphors. Being identified with Polynesian students meant—as it did for Māori teachers—being held responsible for their ‘behaviour’, and also, interestingly, being the target of a kind of confessional. Teachers would tell me of the most appalling forms of their behaviour, along with a kind of pseudo-explanation, clearly feeling that to justify this to me was some kind of exculpation for themselves. I never understood this. And I never responded to the invitation to get into a debate about it.

Later, when I was working as a tutor within Susan Robertson’s team at the University of Auckland Roger Dale introduced me to the work of Vygotsky. I was really excited because he gave formal endorsement of the ways of working that I had developed as a teacher. Behaviour modification and Piaget had something to offer, but missed entirely two major points: one is that teaching is not fundamentally technical or rational, although both those qualities can help at the right time. Teaching and learning—‘ako’ is inherently social.

Behaviour modification depends ultimately on the same concept as neo-liberalism, that the individual knows their own preferences and will alter their behaviour to achieve those preferences, ie it relies on greed or need, usually food- need. Piaget on the other hand relies on the individual’s perception of the distinction between belief and reality. Both percepts have their uses, and neither approaches the nature of teaching, and moreover they reduce the practice of teaching to a technical craft, in which the content is a presupposed field and there are no significant differences between persons. Piaget unfortunately leaves us a Cartesian inheritance,

embedded in the official preference for the word 'learners' which attempts to reduce our student-people to a part of their brain function.

The politics of NZ education

To return to the political then. Prior to the Muldoon era the Minister for Education was widely respected and unchallenged. Ministers of Education were held to be almost outside political strife, because Education was held to be a non-political game. We can see now, that this was simply because both sides of the pakeha political spectrum agreed on the fundamental policy, that Education was meant to maintain the status quo. We still valorise the Beeby/Fraser statement, without asking too deeply what the characteristics were which would identify for each child what would be the future for which they were 'best suited'. While Maori were still largely rural, I think there would not be much debate about what kind of life for which teachers would assume they were 'best suited'.

However, Merv Wellington (NZ Minister of Education 1978–1984) rocked that particular boat, not by challenging the racial discrepancies of educational practice, but by trying to embed a political conservatism. I profoundly disagreed with him, but he did recognise that education was political, not at all a neutral process. His particular gripe was 'social engineering' by which he meant that school teachers were too liberal in their thinking and were introducing radical ideas to the young, to which they should not be exposed. Nowadays I think we might understand that Education can never be politically neutral—the status quo is as political a position as a liberal one. But Wellington's rhetoric and anxieties can still be easily found in the contemporary educational political landscape. Perhaps we can see these views at their most extreme in Florida, but they also surfaced in the recent resistance to teaching the history of Aotearoa New Zealand. Usually presented as concerns about *curriculum* it is easy to see that these concerns, being rooted in the preservation of a particular world view, in an interest in preserving privilege in relation to the interpretation of history, also impact *pedagogy*.

Western ideas of pedagogy

I have explored other ideas about pedagogy over a long teaching career. From Roger Dale I learnt of the existence of Vygotsky, and was incredibly excited. Here was a theory or a theoretician who put together Marx and Piaget and came up with something very similar to my mix of Freire and Piaget. To Vygotsky, history matters—he is essentially finding the practical applications of Marx's historical dialectic, itself based on Hegel. If history matters, if it is part of a teleological process—then how? For Vygotsky the answer was that history is embedded in culture and hence in the language. That is why children should be taught in their own language from the beginning, if not when they are older (Vygotsky, 1980). These ideas have been incredibly useful in New Zealand, where they give a theoretic basis to *kohanga reo*.

So, in my Vygotskian period, I took on a constructivist colouration, and wrote a paper for the Waikato Journal, proposing that teachers could have a real influence on the nature of their students by essentially treating them well, and with respect, and emphasizing what they could do rather than what they couldn't. I still think there is a lot of value in that position—it was of course a plea against the kind of negativity one sees so much of in schools, (or did at the time, perhaps the world is a better place now). But nowadays I would be more suspicious of my own position. Constructivism of this kind, like Behaviour Modification, can be used to bring about compliance. And while compliance should never be underestimated in the classroom, it should not be the major or only goal of a good pedagogue.

Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2003) is regarded as a distinctively Māori pedagogy, but the pedagogical input was largely provided by Professor Ted Glynn, on a Vygotskian basis.

Vygotsky's theory of the development of language suggests that children learn best by engagement with an adult, but that in the absence of an adult, discussion with other children can form a meaningful substitute. The group work of Te Kotahitanga is based on this premise, as well as on the collegial social theories and practices of Māori, and indeed Pasifika people. But although it insists that the primary factor in school success is the relationship between teachers and students, it doesn't actually address this. It provides a very good pedagogical platform, and the assumption is that better teaching will create better relationships, and this is very true. But it doesn't tell teachers how to form those better relationships—although let me be clear I thought it was an excellent programme and cannot understand the Ministry's decision to let it lapse.

One of the European philosophers to directly address the question of the relationship between teacher and student is Derrida. In *The politics of friendship*, Derrida addresses the attitude of the 'sage', via Nietzsche.

Nietzsche/Derrida's sage does not love his students—they are too many and too distant—but he knows that for them to know that he does not love them would be a major emotional disaster for them (and probably impede their learning), so he pretends to love them, while he does not actually do so, and yet his pretence is founded on a more abstract love for them, in that he cares not to harm them. I can see the point, indeed one of my own student teachers summed up a slightly different point, that a teacher will quickly lose credibility and influence or effectiveness if students realise that the teacher doesn't like them, by saying 'fake it until you make it'. But this is not exactly Derrida's point. An abstract love for one's students seems to me to be an ethical and essential component of the teacherly role, but to be an insufficient account of good or even effective teaching. There is no 'until you make it' in Derrida's story: it simply is the case that the sage/teacher loves his students—in the abstract—and not in the particular. What he fakes is the impression that his love for his students is personal (Derrida, 1997).

Yet, this, again, is an entirely apolitical view of the teaching relationship. The content and context are black holes. For me, this will always be a kind of attenuated account of pedagogy: a pedagogy without a context, almost without a purpose. Even the notion of *caring* (Noddings, 1992) has paternalistic, or perhaps maternalistic overtones. I prefer an image drawn from pregnancy: motherhood is not just a case of carrying an alien body for 9 months and being rid of it: at a cellular level the mother is ineradicably altered by each child she carries: fetal cells pervade her body too. There are parallels I think with being a teacher: the traffic is not all one way, if a teacher is open to it, then their students have profound impact on the way the teacher is, their way of being.

The Vā

To this point I have discussed pedagogy as an ontological process: how teachers see their students, how students see their teachers. But we remain bounded by the individualism of western thought. So, I mentioned earlier the notion of 'beliefs and practices' of my Pacific and Maori students as being *different*. And this is where I get to the notion of the difference as a facet of the relationships that students and teachers are supposed to form. From a palagi, that is, a 'European' perspective, the relationship is formed by teacher and student, and ends when the pedagogic relationship ends—at the end of term or the end of a thesis. But the 'vā' implies a different kind of relationship. The vā in itself represents a different concept or set of concepts relating to time and space. It is the distance that connects, over space and over time. The concept exists as 'Va'a', Vā or Wa across Māori and Pacific communities. This relationship is comprised of reciprocal relationships that may not involve even this specific teacher or that specific student. It is a memory of kindnesses, of psychic or material debts, of friendships and kin relationships. In this sense, when a teacher engages with a student they inherit all the goodwill that previous teachers have created for that family—or conversely, all the lack of

goodwill. I have teacher friends who are teaching the grandchildren of their earliest students, and in the relationships formed before they even meet at school, you can see the *vā* at work.

The bedrock of this notion of *vā* is that each child is not an individual, but a relational being, one who represents their family, both existing and dead, and consequently carries the *mana* of that family. To treat them with disrespect is not just to disrespect that child. You can see why some families are reluctant to send their kids to school. But you can also see how a positive relationship can be formed when the teacher sees the student not as a 'learner' a kind of de-bodied automaton, with only a part of the brain surviving, but as a whole person created within and by a series of relationships. Jeanne Teisina's research (Teisina, 2021) shows that among Tongan elders, a person is not seen as an individual: individuality is something that has to be earned through laudable ways of being. The child is not an individual: they are members of the 'we' that Figiel (1996) refers to in the title of her book 'Where we once belonged'. The teacher may—or may not—be an individual in this form of understanding.

Back to politics (and poverty)

In the 1980s New Zealand experienced little less than an economic revolution: the socialism of the 1930s—still evident in publicly owned healthcare and a largely public education system—was substantially overturned. Many publicly owned businesses were privatized, on the ideological grounds that private ownership was inherently more efficient, and that government should be as small as possible. The problem was that, in the particular circumstances of this country, some of the institutions could not profitably be privatized—like the railways—and others were simply gutted for their immediately available profits—like the forests. The common denominator to many of these enterprises was that they were big employers of Māori and Pacific people. Add to that the penalties of the Great Financial Crisis (which was the quite specific outcome of the deregulation of the previous two decades) in 2008 and you have huge, endemic, persistent unemployment and distress especially in concentrated areas of Māori, Pacific and immigrant populations. There are two implications of these phenomena for teaching and pedagogy.

The first is the persistent attack on the role of the teacher. I hesitate to say 'autonomy' because teachers have never been autonomous—if anyone is—because they have always been part of a system which constrained the possibilities of their work. However, it is fair to say that government put a huge amount of effort into further constraining teachers and reducing the small degree of independence they did have. Unfortunately, by making schools into independent NGOs and giving their Boards at least illusory independence the government made control of the teachers more difficult rather than less, and they had to find various ways around this. One is through teacher education, which the government effectively controls. One was through the curriculum. We have always had a national curriculum, so there was no resistance to that idea. But the notion that teachers should be judged on whether or not they 'delivered' that curriculum, rather than on any other aspect of their professional practice was a new one. Schools—and hence teachers—were likewise controlled through the assessment system. The overarching principle of the reforms, not just in education, was that of 'provider capture', the notion that public servants, because they cannot make profit directly, turn their self-interest towards advantages to themselves like bigger offices, unnecessary promotions, shorter hours etc. The Minister of Education, David Lange was particularly committed to this idea, but it has outlasted him, and reappears in the rhetoric of the current government. This is why the maintenance grants to schools were not increased for so long: the belief was that there must—by definition—be slack in the system so a programme of austerity would force teachers to find and utilize that slack. Inherent in this view is a de-natured view of the teacher as *homo economicus*, and of the students as learning machines.

So—I'm coming back to the pedagogical issues—we had/have a population of people whose economic basis had been destroyed. Clearly this has implications for learning, and we can only

applaud those who have undertaken breakfast clubs, made uniform more accessible and so on. But the underlying problem remains, and it is becoming very evident through the attendance figures, complicated by Covid of course, and the anxieties that Covid and its consequences have produced, but nonetheless clearly reaching back to multi-generational unemployment, and the disillusionment with the education system that goes with that.

One of the legacies of the naughties, is the disparagement of the notion that economic circumstances makes a difference to the pedagogic environment. This may have been tenable pre the GFC and Covid, although it was in my view always a marginal argument—its strength was that it outlawed the use of poverty and the accompanying circumstances as an excuse for poor teaching. But, given that we now have trouble even getting students to school, let alone developing any pedagogic engagement with them, and that poverty and the consequences of Covid are clearly implicated, I think we have to give this one up. Castigated as ‘deficit theorising’, I totally applaud the notion that we cannot allow the sequelae of poverty to undermine our concepts of students as able to learn, but to ignore the actual physical and psychic consequences of illness, malnutrition, abuse and exploitation—that is bonkers. There can be no question but that these circumstances (fundamentally the responsibility of politicians), affect the work of teachers, and the ability of students to learn. No amount of trimming, of the use of Māori words, or pamphlets explaining how to teach Pacific students, can compensate for the immense disadvantages many Māori and Pacific students labour under.

Conclusion

I have meandered a bit I concede, in exploring notions of pedagogy and politics in this little mini-narrative of New Zealand’s education system. It can be seen as a case study, I suppose, or as a petit-narrative which might be used to help explore other ways of thinking and living. We have paid a good deal of attention to conflicts over the nature of what is to be taught: knowledge, curriculum. What I have drawn attention to here is conflicts over the ontology of pedagogy: the relationships beyond curriculum.

Essentially I argue that the relationship between teacher and taught is an ethical one: in clear contradistinction to the neo-liberal ideal of the functionary relationship. Of course, not all teachers and students achieve this ethical relationship—it isn’t something that can be taken for granted, or mandated. It’s a moment in time, perhaps repeated moments in time, which generate a certain confidence in both the teacher and the student, which form a solid basis for learning, for ‘ako’ rather than for instruction.

I have been privileged to live in a country in which Māori have been assured the right to education *as Māori*. It will never happen, of course, and does not constitutionally extend to Pacifica or other immigrant people. But it does open up, make possible, the respectful encounter with the Other. Colin Davis suggests that ‘Levinas’s ethics revolve around the possibility that I might encounter something which is radically other than myself. Western philosophy, Levinas suggests, has missed the encounter because it has always sought to appropriate the Other, to neutralize the threat it poses to the autonomy and sovereignty of the Same. (Davis, 1996, p. 142). And again... ‘Levinas offers an ethics without rules, imperatives, maxims or clear objectives other than a passionate moral conviction that the Other should be heard’ (Davis, 1996, p. 144).

And that is what I have tried to do, to hear the Other. It isn’t hard, but does require a bit of effort. As teachers, as palagi, we are always so keen to show, to tell, to fill in the answer, to know how to do it. A little bit of silence really helps.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Nesta Devine was a Professor of Education at Auckland University of Technology from 2008 to 2023. Prior to that she taught in the Teacher Education programme at the University of Waikato. Her particular interests are philosophy of education and Māori and Pacific thought. Her interest in these fields was aroused while she was a secondary school teacher of History, working with a diverse range of students in Auckland schools.

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