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Whatever Happened to the Disciplines in Education?

GUEST EDITOR: CRAIG CAMPBELL (UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY)

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Editorial

There is no doubt that the focus of academic work in schools of education has changed quite dramatically over the last half century. In Australia this development coincided with a dramatic institutional transference of teacher education from teachers colleges run by state education departments to new and old universities, a process mainly completed in the 1980s. It took place also at a time of changing social and economic policies of government, many of which required more accountability and measurable outcomes for money spent, and a requirement that more be done with fewer resources provided from public sources.

These pressures had their impact on teacher education curricula. Although teacher pre-service education had never before enjoyed such lengthy periods in higher education institutions, newly emergent demands on that time quickly saw the development of overcrowded curricula. In a period when school student retention levels moved upwards, when schools began to take on new welfare and custodial roles, and school leaders were encouraged to imagine themselves as corporate managers, the complexity of schooling, and the education required to take account of that complexity, only increased.

As these processes occurred, educational research underwent a variety of paradigm shifts. The movements discussed in the paper by David Smith and Robyn Ewing in this edition of Change show some of the impacts on the broad field of curriculum studies and beyond. The paper by Richard Walker and Ray Debus alerts us to similar and dramatic change in educational psychology. Such transformations were widely felt across the fields and disciplines of education, as other papers in this edition demonstrate.

The defining problem of this edition is the question: 'Whatever happened to the disciplines in education?'. The question was originally asked a year ago in an extended symposium in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney. The prospectus advertising the series and encouraging papers read thus:

The study of education, and the role of that study in the education of potential teachers has changed dramatically over the past fifty years. The presenters of this series have been asked to consider a range of issues. They include a review of the major intellectual trends over the past fifty years in their fields, an assessment of the changing role of the field in teacher education and some reflection on the organisation of the field through academic societies. The focus is on Australia, but not exclusively so. The series promises a timely assessment of the past and potential future for the 'disciplines' in education.
One of the interesting features of the reform of teacher education has been the changing fortunes of the ‘foundations’, or the ‘disciplines’ in education. Their place in the curriculum has often been transformed in at least two quite distinct ways. First, there have been internal transformations. In their papers Geoffrey Sherington and Craig Campbell demonstrate this internal transformation in the ‘history of education’, while Marjorie O’Loughlin shows how the process occurred in the ‘philosophy of education’. Second has been the broad transformations of curriculum as older subjects of study have made way for new, and as new subjects of study have been invented and older ones transmogrified. Such developments have often resulted from movements toward interdisciplinarity, new solutions to the theory and practice conundrum, and reconceptualisations of educational problems involving paradigmatic shifts in theory, knowledge production and research method.

Any broad curriculum sequence or arrangement may be viewed as genealogical in character. Change is constant; some elements hold on with little challenge over lengthy periods of time. Some disappear or are transformed while others enter the sequence for the first time. The process is both historical and contingent in character. This edition of Change concentrates for the most part on the fate of those subjects which once reigned supreme; they were in fact, described as the ‘foundations’. For the most part they were closely attached to reasonably well established ‘disciplines’ in the social sciences or humanities. But even in the period of the foundation of the ‘foundations’, as Phillip Jones discusses in his paper, there was ‘comparative education’. It drew on a range of disciplines such as economics, history and political science, without being settled in any one of them.

In their disciplinary forms, as discrete subjects of study, the ‘foundations’ have had to fight hard for their continuing place in teacher education. In some places they appear to have lost the battle. Anxiety and struggle over the place of the ‘foundations’ in teacher education and education studies is not confined to Australia. In the most recent edition of the American Educational Research Association’s journal, the Review of Research in Education, its editor refers to the loosening of educational research relationships with the disciplines (Secada, 2001, p. ix). He asks directly: ‘Are the foundational disciplines, as currently construed, relevant any longer, or are they the leftover vestiges of a time that is past?’ (p. x). Secada argues for their continuing relevance, but if the question is considered worth debating at the level of education research, we can easily imagine the debate and decisions occurring at undergraduate and post-graduate course-work levels for teacher education in general.

Some of the papers in this edition are pessimistic about both the achievements and futures of their disciplines in education. Robert Young’s view of the sociology of education is one of the papers that may be read in this vein. Nevertheless Young contributes a vision of an invigorated discipline which could be more closely connected to the classroom and school, indeed, the ‘lifeworld’. Few of the voices raised here pretend to definitive statement or magisterial judgement on the status, past or present, of their
discipline or field. They are part of an ongoing attempt to explore such issues in the field of education studies across the globe. In the sociology of education for example, a process of renewal amidst the problems of the past is clearly discernable in books such as that edited by Demaine in Britain (2001).

Some may read this collection of articles as a lament for times past, but a closer reading will show that this is not the case. The ‘foundation disciplines’ will stand or fall according to their continuing ability to adapt to contemporary definitions of and needs in teacher education and education studies. In each of the papers here, there are strong signs of renewal and continuing relevance. The story of educational psychology in recent times, as told by Walker and Debus, is perhaps the most confident statement of such a case.

A special feature of this collection is the contribution on ‘curriculum studies’. Its authors, Smith and Ewing, take vigorous pains to separate their field from disciplinary definition. Theirs is an important contribution because it demonstrates, the contributions of the disciplines to the field’s original definition and development. More significantly it also alerts us to the continuing challenge that the embodied and practical world of teaching in classrooms and schools poses for teacher education and education studies. This is a challenge that the foundational disciplines in education are required to meet. Not to do so constitutes a peril to their continuing survival and growth.

A final contribution to this discussion specifically addresses the declining contribution of the disciplines to educational research in Australia. The paper by Allyson Hollbrook and Margaret Findlay grew from their involvement in the preparation of an evaluation of Australian educational research recently published by the federal government (DETYA, 2000).

As the convener of the original symposium and now, this edition of Change, I thank the paper-givers and contributors. I thank the Editor of Change, Judyth Sachs for her support for the special edition, and Sue Kyle for her administrative assistance.

I am especially grateful to Bob Connell for the laborious role he volunteered in the process of preparing this edition.

CRAIG CAMPBELL, GUEST EDITOR

REFERENCES:

Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.