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CATEGORIES

equity in schooling, high stakes testing, post-truth, Safe Schools

TAGS

post-truth, Stewart Riddle

December.12.2016

What does the post-truth world hold for teachers and educational researchers?

By Stewart Riddle

As 2016 draws to an end, I am left with a deep sense that things are going very, very wrong. I waver between fury and frustration, unease and dread. But these feelings are useless without some action.

I presented in a symposium at the AARE conference recently on social justice, and our theme was reframing and resisting educational inequality.

It struck me that there have been some really powerful examples of reframing and resisting this year.

For example, we have seen Nigel Farage and the Brexiteers do a stunning job of reframing the UK; we've seen Donald Trump resist every moment of rationality and opposition, instead successfully employing what has been described as a choreography of shame to

take the presidency of the US. And here in Australia, we've seen the zombie-like rise of Pauline Hanson and One Nation from the political dead.



We have seen the TIMSS and PISA results released. Almost unanimously, the Australian media took the line that Australian students are slipping down the rankings and, heaven forbid, we're even being beaten by Kazakhstan.

Leaving aside the incredible display of casual racism, xenophobia and complete lack of cultural awareness being displayed in the commentary, the fact is that TIMSS and PISA say very little about Australian schooling at all.

Yet, our federal education minister argues this is an urgent wake-up call proving that equity-based funding is unimportant and that instead we need to fix teachers and increase slipping standards in our schools.

Actually, minister, all we really need to do to improve our rankings is make the Northern Territory and Tasmania go away (to New Zealand, perhaps?) and hide all of the students who dare to come from circumstances of social and material deprivation or those who have special learning needs. Watch us rocket up the rankings!

Perhaps the most striking thing for me has been the way that discourses of equity and social justice have been mobilised in a very public and powerful way to argue for more testing, for more restrictions and control over teachers and teacher education, and to push for market models of education that undermine the public for private profit.

In the US, Trump has chosen a billionaire for his education secretary and has already announced a huge investment in turning public schools into charter schools. Similarly, Theresa May has a plan for more Grammar schools in the UK. Both are presented as addressing educational inequality.

Here in Australia, we have a phonics test suggested for our youngest students, modelled on the one the UK introduced a couple of years ago. Again, the argument is that this is needed most for children who are disadvantaged.

Education research is trash-talked on social media and given little oxygen in mainstream media and public discourse and is almost invisible in the policy arena.

The message is really powerful and simple and consistently prosecuted: education is broken because of bad teachers and teachers are bad because of teacher educators who are a bunch of out-of-touch educationalists who don't know anything about the way the world works.

Of course all of this is complete rubbish.

I wonder about the correlation between increasing systems of surveillance and control over curriculum and pedagogy and the growing number of high stakes testing regimes, audit

and accountability technologies, and the narrative of slipping standards, declining outcomes and an education system in crisis.



I wonder about how another set of tests is going to address sliding test results.

I wonder about what it means that we have had conservative coalition governments in control of the national policy agenda in this country for fifteen of the past twenty years.

I wonder about what it means when we have climate denying, market ideologues in control who reframe equity as a problem of teacher quality, who advocate for school vouchers instead of a vibrant public education system, who engage highly politicised and influential free-market think tanks in doing their policy work for them, while education researchers are ignored and teachers, parents, students and entire communities are reduced to those who simply have policy done to them.

I wonder what it means when I see multiple reports of children in the US being told by their classmates and in some cases, their teachers, that they will be locked up or their parents deported and themselves put into orphanages because they are Mexican or Muslim.

I wonder what it means when I read about a 10-year-old girl who says a boy who "grabbed her vagina" said it was okay because "if a president could do it, I can too".

I wonder what it means when a 13-year-old Queensland boy takes his life because of bullying and the Courier Mail runs a piece calling the Safe Schools program "repulsive" and decrying "the ludicrous notion that most of our subjects nowadays include Indigenous, Asian and environmental components."

I wonder what it means when Pauline Hanson calls for a ban on Muslim immigration and her fellow One Nation senator, Malcolm Roberts, declares that climate change is a "scam" cooked up by the CSIRO and NASA.

I wonder what it means that we lock up children indefinitely on Nauru, subjecting them to cruel and inhumane degradations, yet when Australian teachers protest, our Prime Minister gets annoyed at their "absolutely inappropriate" behaviour.

I think it's telling that the Oxford dictionary declared "post-truth" as the 2016 word of the year. Similarly, Dictionary.com chose "xenophobia" as their word of the year.

So what does a post-truth world mean for educational research, social justice, equity and addressing educational inequality?

What are the ways we can mobilise and fight back against the xenophobe, the misogynist, the racist, the anti-intellectual, the billionaire posing as a saviour for the common person, the rampant destruction of our natural systems on a global scale, and the complete disregard for the future of our planet and all who live on it?

We need to organise, to collectivise and not just to resist and reframe, but to entirely reconfigure how we approach social inequality through our individual and collective endeavours.

We need to grow community-based, regional, national and transnational networks that can stand together and reject the framing of education as simply a problem of bad teaching that completely ignores structural and systemic inequalities and decades-long policy failures.

We need to produce local, situated and deeply contextualised knowledges that are generated with the communities we work with.

We need a radical reimagining of the politics and practices of educational research.

We need to fight.



Dr Stewart Riddle lectures in literacies education at the University of Southern Queensland. His research includes looking at the links between music and literacy in the lives of young people, as well as alternative schooling and research methodologies. Stewart also plays bass guitar in a rock band called Drawn from Bees.

Stewart is a member of the English Teachers' Association of Queensland management committee and edits their journal,

Words'Worth.

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16 thoughts on "What does the post-truth world hold for teachers and educational researchers?"



Ania Lian

December 12, 2016 at 11:18 am

Thanks Stewart,

that was a lot of emotions and questions in your blog.

There is also a lot of research that has been and is being done in education and I guess what you are saying is that the government does not take account of it

(although it funds it) and that its PISA reading is another evidence of that. Why would the government go against the learned advice? I think you suggest that it is doing just that. You also suggest that we lack community-based networks, or are you saying that

we lack the right ones? Are you saying that our educational and research communities are parochial? Also, you seem to suggest that education research should speak with one voice. Isn't it today? If "we" are to "re-frame and reconfigure how we approach social inequality", what is the current intellectual (not political) framework and what exactly needs to go?

best wishes

Ania Lian

CDU



Stewart Riddle

December 12, 2016 at 5:50 pm

Hi Ania,

Thanks for the comments. To be honest, I do not know what 'needs to go' nor do I think we need a single voice as educational researchers. In fact, if anything, I'd argue for even more plurality, more openness, more difference and more responses to what is a complex range of issues. My point in this piece is that something is going very wrong on a global level, and that decades of the progressive left pushing the agenda of democratic education, critical literacy, and so on, perhaps needs a rethinking given the circumstances of our time.



Ania Lian

December 13, 2016 at 8:33 pm

Thank you Stewart

You say you want plurality but you are not ready to say if we have plurality now. In TESOL we had this discussion 20 years ago on "what to cull" and most people agreed that we should cull "what is not in the mainstream", what is not their idea" but most of all we should keep some stuff in. I then wondered, "in the name of what?". When will we know we have plurality of voices? I cant see this to be a difficult question. I also dont know that we can simply assume (repeat after others) that stuff is going wrong at the global level. There is a way out then: to show what goes right at the local level. What would the criteria be and will the plurality include the technocrats?

Also is progressive left the same as neoliberalists? I get lost in that name-calling. Maybe to start the "rethinking" we could ask whose voices count?
with best wishes

ania lian

CDU

PS. I love the theme graphic of this blog, but maybe it is time to replace it with something reflecting less how we feel and more where we are going?



Jonathan Anstock, principal Queensland Teacher Professional Development

December 12, 2016 at 11:58 am

Stewart,

Your article is an echo of what I hear regularly. Where the hell are we going? Education is my passion. I see education as part of (or should be part of) a cultural

sphere of life and freed from political and economic constraints as much as possible. I applaud your research into the links between music and literacy. I talk a lot at my workshops about how assisting the musical/rhythmical element to arrive for primary school children is so important. One of the ignored aspects of the arts in the art of teaching I'm afraid. Keep up the research. Rudolf Steiner gave a lot of information on just this topic in many of his lectures. Jonathan.



Stewart Riddle

December 12, 2016 at 5:59 pm

Hi Jonathan,

We do need to ask ourselves the hard questions about what kind of education we want for young people and what kind of society we are building with them...



Jennifer M Miller

December 12, 2016 at 12:47 pm

A well-written article with a strong argument for equity and fairness in education. Part of the problem is that academics themselves have too easily slipped into irrelevance and theoretical navel-gazing. Teaching and learning are not high priorities in education faculties, or not as I have understood this over a lifetime in the field. Research ethics and access are extremely difficult in low SES schools. How many papers at AARE entailed classroom-based empirical research rather than conceptual reframing/positioning/etc? Where are the research data when we need them?



Stewart Riddle

December 12, 2016 at 6:01 pm

Thanks for the comment, Jennifer. I wouldn't say that academics have slipped into irrelevance but that we do need to work both individually and collectively in ways that better connect research to policy and practice.



Julie Matthews

December 12, 2016 at 2:43 pm

Well said Stewart.



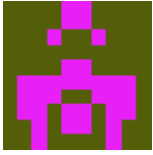
Stewart Riddle

December 12, 2016 at 6:06 pm

Thanks, Julie.

Pingback: [What does the post-truth world hold for teachers and educational researchers? – Stewart Riddle](#)

Pingback: [My year: words, music, and why gravity always wins – Stewart Riddle](#)



Bruce Lyons December 13, 2016 at 7:59 pm

Stewart you were well and truly on a roll. Well done. I heartily agree with most of your sentiment in terms of world and Aussie politics and student learning. I am sick of the Federal Minister for Education et al implying that teachers need to lift their game in the light of the reports of our students' performance on the international stage. Having said this I am an advocate of the new Australian National Curriculum (ANC) recognising that the States are using this with their own variations. That's my good news the bad being the demise of the full Gonski reforms to redistribute fiscal resources to level the playing field.

I am a retired teacher, school principal and superintendent of schools who spent his career with the Education Department of WA. I have always looked to research to guide and improve my practices as an educator. However of recent times as I keep up with my reading I am concerned at the complex terminology and the ubiquitous paradigms and flow charts. Even gurus like the great Michael Fullan who taught me all I know about change in education have fallen into this trap.

While on the subject of change I have long been of the view that educators have not striven hard enough to learn how to bring about real change at a cost that is bearable within budgets. I have seen so much money wasted on ill conceived change goals and implementation strategies. Teachers often have been given little say in the process. There is much support for the view that teachers working together are effective in-service providers for one another.

Now to focus on schooling in Australia. Our schools are being too constrained by the demands of testing regimes like NAPLAN. I am not against NAPLAN and would find the snapshots of student performance a useful indicator alongside the ongoing teacher assessment of student performance.

My concerns are that the pressures of the NAPLAN type testing regimes are forcing teachers to move students relentlessly through the syllabus requirements of say the ANC. If students are in year 4 by age they are expected as a matter of course to be doing the year 4 prescribed syllabus work.

It doesn't work like that in reality. My experience shows that each student is learning as best they can, assuming generally effective teaching, based on all the in-school and out-of-school factors that are affecting their life at that time. Learning at the year level syllabus work commensurate within their age is not appropriate for many students because they have not mastered the building blocks to be at that level. In syllabus areas like English language, the basics of which are reading, spelling, writing, speaking and listening, and in mathematics some students are likely to be forced ahead regardless of whether they have mastered the prerequisites for the new learning. In so doing gaps in the learning accumulate leaving those students floundering as they progress deep into their school years.

It would take a determined school principal to swim against the tide of this forcing of students on by allowing teachers to take their time to ensure that students have mastered the pre-requisites for the new learning to come. Such a principal would naturally bring the parents well and truly into this more relevant learning progress model. I am not the only educator worried about the accumulation of gaps in the learning of some students.

I have written at length on this no gaps approach in a small book on school effectiveness (yet to be published) but there is too much detail to expand further in this blog comment. Suffice to state that to make such a no gaps approach work

requires a lightening up on formal assessment demands in other syllabus areas especially at primary school level. Students should exit primary school as literate and numerate as they can be and excited about science, social studies, art and so on. Physical and health education and performing arts have special place in my education plan. All of this is to occur in a context of a well conceived and implemented student wellbeing program.

Our brave principal would also need to gradually remove from the school reference to student laziness, the labelling of students as remedial and comments about not achieving potential. Such concepts have no place in an environment where it is recognised that each student is learning as best they can given all the in-school and out-of school factors affecting their lives daily.

It is most unlikely that the polities would accept this no gaps approach. The teaching profession needs to have faith in that it is truly a profession that has a voice. The large body of teachers, school administrators and teacher educators need to raise a storm so that they can take control in the schools and be allowed to educate the students based on sound evidence-based practice.

May the Force be with we educators as we swim against the current political tide in Australia.

GD



Bruce Lyons

December 14, 2016 at 5:32 pm

Stewart I forgot to say in my long comment that we are fellow guitar players. I am a rank amateur but just got an electric guitar to add to my acoustic one. Love it.

As you may have noted in my comment I believe performing arts have a special place in schools. I have observed over the years wonderful school productions with maximum participation from the students. How their faces light up when the audience applauds. For some who find the academic work a challenge it may be their major school success for the year.

I just made a quick trip from Perth to Sydney to watch two of my grand daughters in their school performance. Every student in this primary school was included. It made me so emotional to see not only my grandchildren but the effect of this occasion on the whole school.

Break a leg Drawn From the Bees.

GD



Bruce Lyons

December 14, 2016 at 5:34 pm

Stewart I meant "...when the audience applauds." Another senior's moment.



Anita Wills

January 6, 2017 at 10:29 am

I am thoroughly enjoying this conversation. Post-truth dilemmas, accruing gaps in primary, the ministerialisation of education, endlessly measuring the pig to see if it

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gets bigger.: it has it all. I will have to go and make some additional notes for my 2017
“first day back” discussion in our team.

Pingback: [When all else fails, make music | Dr Stewart Riddle](#)

Comments are closed.

