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Teaching and learning

James Avis

British education is marked by differentiation in terms of race, gender, class and disability. These social differences articulate to the varying tracks students pursue in schooling and beyond and are reflected in teaching styles. There is a struggle surrounding the implementation and development of the national curriculum. Some progressive elements within teaching have tried to introduce the language of curriculum entitlement, equal opportunities and the recognition of social difference, whereas others view the national curriculum as beyond redemption. Nationally the progressive developments that have emerged are the result of the involvement of teachers and others in politics surrounding the national curriculum in its implementation and development. On a local level progressive aspects have derived from the work of particular schools where teachers have drawn up and re-worked the national curriculum to emphasise its progressive aspects.

Whilst the delivery of the national curriculum is left to individual schools, it is nevertheless located within a framework that is deeply conservative and marked by social differentiation. For example, it seems likely that at Key Stage 4 differentiation will be exacerbated as a result of the development of a vocational track alongside the academic. This development sits comfortably with existing provision for example, TVE, CPVE, BTEC and so forth. These vocationally-orientated interventions have frequently been construed as progressive by curriculum modernisers. The use of experiential learning, student-centred approaches, records of achievement etc are emphasised in this current. We find the language of equal opportunities, curriculum entitlement, learner-centredness and negotiated learning being rhetorically stressed by modernisers. Such rhetoric belies an underlying capitalist logic that serves

to perpetuate inequalities surrounding social difference.

This is not, however, to deny the development of progressive practice by some of those involved in this area of work. There is a struggle over the language of equal opportunities and entitlement. Curriculum modernisers attempt to locate this language within existing relations and aim to encourage economic modernisation. Such a strategy fails to take seriously social difference, social antagonism and any notion of collectivity. By social difference I refer to those relations surrounding class, race, gender, sexuality and the fragmentations embodied in these categories. This notion implies that social difference constituted outside schools has a bearing on teaching. Such differences are reconstituted in the course of teaching and learning. This has significance for our understanding of teacher professionalism, which is predicated

on a teaching nexus focused on the atomistic individual. A recognition of social difference implies that such a model needs to be reworked to recognise collectivity. Social antagonism recognises the contradictory and fundamental conflict of interests present within and outside education. Antagonism surrounds social difference and refers not only or exclusively to class but also to gender, race and sexuality. Progressive practice needs to take on board a notion of antagonism; failure to do so delivers a practice that aligns with the ethos of liberal capitalism. Such practice denies the existence of fundamental conflicts and structural patterns of exploitation and oppression present in society.

Towards a radical professionalism

Teacher culture is marked by a well-developed sense of fairness and justice which is reflected in support for equal opportunity. However, this is set against a model of teaching predicated on a one-to-one relationship and which can cloud the issue of social difference and antagonism. A radical professionalism would recognise collectivity and would necessitate a rethinking of practice. Teacher professionalism places politics outside schooling and the classroom. Whilst it is recognised that the Conservative government has politicised education, this is seen more as an interruption than as recognition of the inherently political nature of education. Teacher professionalism that denies its politics inevitably delivers a conservative practice. The politics of practice needs to be recognised and a dialogue over the nature of education should be developed. This would emerge through the development of a radical professionalism. There is a need to join with other progressive social movements and constituencies that are struggling over and with education. Amongst these we would find parents, pupils and others such as progressive managers, LEA officials and so forth. By engaging in such dialogue, constituencies would find it necessary to rework themselves. For example, teachers would need to rethink what it is to be a teacher, a professional and

their relation to students and the communities they serve. It is important that recognition is made of the skills and knowledge teachers possess and that they are constituted as active participants in this dialogue.

Curriculum categories and student orientations

There has been much criticism of the academic/vocational divide: the former for its distance from the lives of students, its abstractness and sterility, and the latter for its narrow vocational focus and failure to encourage critique. In many cases student orientations are marked by instrumentalism, either in the pursuit of credentials or of knowledge because of its occupational purchase. We need to take seriously the way students are, and how they position themselves in relation to knowledge, the stakes they have made in particular forms and the goals they are pursuing. It is only by taking these seriously and attempting to satisfy them that we can hope to move forward and develop really useful knowledge. What significance would this have for curriculum categories and practice?

A number of questions flow from this:

1. How can teaching be re-formed to recognise social difference as well as interrupting reproductive tendencies?
2. What would this mean for practice? What sort of teaching/learning models need to be developed that could address a constituency of learners marked not only by social difference but by the antagonisms of class, race, gender and so forth?
3. What would this mean for models of teacher professionalism, for parental involvement, for social movements directly and tangentially related? What part would local communities play in this process?
4. What sort of progressive constituency could be formed around teaching and learning?
5. How should we re-work curriculum categories?

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