

SK005068**THE MANUFACTURING OF “CRISES” IN PUBLIC EDUCATION:
THE ADVANCE AGAINST THE PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER**Andrew Skourdombis
Williamstown High School**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines some of the issues involved in claims of “crises” in public education. The intention is to examine recent research from within this field from Australia and to briefly outline the contemporary nature of the crisis in public education argument. It is argued within the paper that whilst debate does indeed occur to some extent suggesting that public education is in crisis, it is a multifarious debate that involves complex issues generally suggestive of the contemporary political and economic context that public education is located within at present. Moreover, this paper poses an argument that alludes to a concealed but nevertheless implied message about a crisis in education from within an education policy sphere aided with and by a methodological research approach whose emphasis forms part of an accepted and dominant field of inquiry, the wider thrust of which is emerging as a debate about teacher and instructional effectiveness. A critical commentary is provided from within a practitioner inquiry basis questioning the foundational arguments of teacher effectiveness studies by firstly considering the nature of educational reform and its impact on teachers and finishing with a possible alternative research approach that may assist teacher practitioners in understanding and recognising the broader though often hidden implications of research inquiry and method.

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform is about bringing forth change. The current education reform agenda particularly from within Victoria emphasizes the improvement of student learning outcomes, not only in a general sense across the entire public education system, but in terms of a targeted reform process for those students and regions that have experienced consistent low performance over a period of time. The demands of an increasingly competitive economy requiring evermore complex and intensified forms of innovative and adaptable levels of vocational skill suggests that educational outcomes for all students must be of the highest calibre. The case for reform particularly within Victoria, but perhaps not limited to Victoria as educational reform is often a national priority, generally rests upon a premise supported by data that students in some regions ‘leave school early, with poor levels of literacy, numeracy and other core learnings’ (Blueprint, 2004). Moreover, educational research tends to indicate that in some schools ‘high variations in student outcomes between classes’ (Blueprint, 2004) exists which according to the available research ‘highlights the importance of quality teaching’ (Blueprint, 2004).

The current educational context with its emphasis upon outcomes explicitly centralizes the work and role of the teacher in the education and learning process. Teacher effectiveness and by its association, instructional effectiveness, represents the new offensive in overcoming social and educational disadvantage as it is an accepted belief that improvements in teacher effectiveness will lead to improved student learning outcomes (Blueprint, 2004). This paper does not doubt the benefits to

improved student learning outcomes of effective teaching, however, it does seek an exploration of the nature of the teacher effectiveness argument at present. In doing so, the paper asks if current teacher effectiveness advocates and associated teacher effectiveness research is simply a manifestation of an ever-present claim of “crises” in public education?

In the first section the paper discusses in a brief form the various crisis claim arguments in public education and suggests that the work and role of the teacher is now considered a decisive component in addressing student educational attainment and learning outcomes. This is followed by an acknowledgement that teachers are now positioned within a re-structured and re-organised economic and political realm, the essence of which affirms an individualised and performance based sense of teacher efficacy whose relevance is correlated to student learning attainment. Brief consideration is then given to the nature of the research approach adopted by teacher effectiveness researchers by inspecting typical statistically relevant information specific to the kind of research methodology utilised. The paper finishes with a brief discussion on the nature of a Bourdieuan research method, which, it is argued, may provide a basis for an alternative and more rigorous approach to matters of educational interest.

THE TARGETS OF REFORM-TEACHERS

Claims of crisis in public education have been on the education agenda for some considerable time. Persistent cries of crisis in unison with criticism of public education have virtually continued unabated since World War II (Cuban, 2003, p.3). Historical reference to the crisis claim in public education is distinctive within each decade of the second half of the twentieth century. Educational “reformers” have seemingly scolded schools with each period post the Second World War expressing its particular form of dissatisfaction with public education. Critiques essentially expressed similar conclusions, in essence that ‘public schools were failing’ (Cuban, 2003, p.3).

Criticism and claims of crisis in public education centre on three key assertions. The first is a line of attack that when considered, is probably the most common and relates to standards of achievement. The second involves criticism of methods of teaching and the third relates to an inadequate treatment of education and religion within contemporary schooling (Cuban, 2003, pp.11-18). In addition, post-Fordist hyper-capitalist modes of production and work practices bring into question the nature of “schooled knowledge” thus, more recently for some researchers, resulting in a general educational crisis revolving around what counts as educational knowledge (Luke et al, 2000, p.7).

An investigation of journal articles within the *Australian Education Researcher* and the *Australian Journal of Education* for the period 2000-2005 does not include any title references to the issue of “crises” in public education. Nevertheless, general claims of crisis within public education still persist with some researchers claiming a crisis of relevance, a post-compulsory schooling crisis, a crisis of

teaching and a crisis of equity (Hattam, 2004, p.12). Moreover, contemporary Australian public schooling may be at present facing a 'crisis of confidence' (Gale in Doecke et al, 2006, p.1) in that the initial promise and hope of schooling as Gale states resided in the two fold expectation that schools would firstly instruct 'society's children in the moral and work ethics of industry' (Gale in Doecke et al, 2006, p.2) thus providing society with a source of skilled labour and secondly, schools would 'enable students to gain access to a better life' (Gale in Doecke et al, 2006, p.2), essentially through the provision of a job.

It is suggested in this paper that the manifestation of a particular and overt form of "crisis" claim within education at present is linked to an ideologically driven and politically charged and partisan debate that in recent times focuses directly upon the effectiveness and performance of teachers within the classroom. To this extent, the study of the effectiveness of teachers derived from a particular methodological research basis forms a reference point from which the effectiveness of schools and the schooling system is judged and critiqued in order to assess its efficacy within an accountability framework emphasizing performativity.

Recent studies (Rowe 2003, Hill, Holmes-Smith and Rowe, 1993,) purport to show that student educational outcomes depend significantly upon a teacher's performance and effectiveness within the classroom. 'Class/teacher effects' (Rowe, 2003, p.1) and the 'quality of teaching and learning provision' (Rowe, 2003, p.1) are regarded as exerting the most influence on a student's level of educational attainment. Moreover, whilst key student background characteristics incorporating literacy skills, general academic achievements, attitudes, behaviours and experiences of schooling all contribute to the learning experience and thus affect student learning outcomes, it is suggested that these factors 'pale into insignificance compared with class/teacher effects' (Rowe, 2003, p.1). Studies of this kind use an empirical approach based upon multiple outcomes measures that may include student achievement in subject disciplines ascertained through implementation of summative assessment techniques such as tests or examinations, student attitudes and behaviours, teachers' perceptions of their work environment and parent participation in and satisfaction with their child's school (Hill, Holmes-Smith and Rowe, 1993, p.5). Studies of this kind also make "adjustments" usually for student "abilities", gender and school sector (government, Catholic, independent). Statistical data collection and subsequent data manipulation including multi-level statistical application identifies information that is broad ranging and also includes teacher effects on student learning and achievement. The vast collection of teacher effectiveness research of the kind cited above dismisses the importance and relevance to educational outcomes of key sociological factors that infringe upon the classroom learning experience. Research of this kind (Blackmore, 2000, Lingard et al, 1998, 2000, Teese and Polesel, 2003) is dismissed as 'mainstream, ideologically-driven opinion' (Rowe, 2003, p.24). In short, critical social theory that informs major sociological aspects of educational theory and practice is considered unworthy and or irrelevant thus elevating the scientific and purely objectivist research method to a superior position in terms of the type and form of research inquiry needed for adequate and competent comment on matters of teacher and instructional effectiveness.

THE CONTEMPORARY “POSITIONING” OF TEACHERS

The modernist practice of teaching and the role of the teacher exists within a neo-liberal and neo-conservative theoretical and political policy boundary and formulation that reduces and constricts the practice of teaching including pedagogy to within an accountability framework that ensures ‘compliance with system imperatives’ (Gale in Doecke et al, 2006, p.5). Moreover, the neo-liberal political orientation with its emphasis upon choice and individual freedom expresses much of what it stands for at present within the education sector in terms of ‘corporate managerialism’ (Considine in Gale and Densmore, 2003, p.25) the focus of which is upon outcomes. The work and role of the teacher within the post-Fordist Australian settlement exists in a policy framework, which has re-structured the work of teachers through neo-liberal management approaches capable of exerting significant control over teaching practice. Furthermore, the managerialist emphasis of neo-liberal educational policy incorporates a ‘market-friendly’ (Robertson, 2000, p.156) approach to education seen as a vital and necessary component in advancing the competitive state model which is underpinned by new forms of economic competitiveness, privatisation and economic deregulation (Robertson, 2000, p.166). The new educational mandate finds its affirmation in “competitiveness” as a necessary and vital social value and social good (Robertson, 2000, p.187).

Post-Keynesian political movements and emergent economic theory predicated on ‘laissez-faire’ (Yeatman in Lingard, 2000, p.54) capital exchange has re-configured the practice of teaching locating it within an ‘individualised professionalism’ (Robertson, 2000, p.204) seeking performance oriented objectives for both teachers and students. Economic reform framed by a ‘human capital rationale’ (Lingard, 2000, p.41) posits teachers at the interface between the needs and imperatives of the economy and “skilling” students for the challenges of the new economic order. Higher and more intense levels of productivity conjoined with an enhanced level of worker or employee skill are seen as key characteristics of new and emerging industries. Competitive advantage defines the post-Fordist employee and schools and teachers are stationed at the centre of a re-configured social and cultural area with education given a ‘starring role’ (Ball in Gale and Densmore, 2003, p.61).

It is to the methodological research framework that this paper now turns, in that, contemporary research debate in education policy formulation appears overwhelmingly influenced by an empirical approach seeking definitive answers to educational research questions that at present relate to the maximisation of student learning outcomes. The scientific research method which informs much of the present teacher effectiveness debate in its directly affective relationship to enhance student learning outcomes, claims epistemological and methodological supremacy as an inquiry tool for the practice of classroom teaching and further, to a documentary and evidential and gradated knowledge obtainment technique for the purpose of comment upon matters of educational relevance in the area of student learning and educational attainment. Closer inspection however, reveals that teaching practice in and of itself, including the method of inquiry, for it too is a form of practice, requires a penetrating scrutiny that ploughs deeper than a simplistic and surface level research method allows.

A TECHNOLOGY OF INFLUENCE

Educational research inquiry as a form of social scientific inquiry is broadly defined within paradigmatic research positions incorporating the positivist, the interpretive and the critical (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.45). Each of the inquiry paradigms is distinctive and are best represented by a research model epistemically defined from within particular academic disciplines. The positivist model originates from within the physical sciences and is best represented by a methodological framework that analyses and regards educational processes as caused and determined. The interpretive is distinctively human and social and it suggests that educational actions are the result of definite choices and as such, matters of education are the direct result of active decision-making based upon what is a preferred value or more broadly what represents the dominant cultural value at a particular time (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, pp.26-27). The critical social science paradigm seeks an alternative approach and as such it provides a basis from which researchers can assess the 'relationship between theory and practice' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.131) from a point of view that recognises any apparent weaknesses between the purely positivist and interpretive paradigms.

The theoretical development of positivist notions of rationalised technique and its application to the educational situation has a basis within the idea of a 'science of education' (Lagemann, 2000, p.71). Indeed, early proponents of the science of education view were in no doubt as to the appropriateness of the scientific and positivist research method and its application to matters of education as they were clear in their belief that education 'has a scientific basis' (Lagemann, 2000, p.71) and all that remained was the application of positivist research inquiry for the discovery of that basis. Furthermore, the instrumentalist positivist research technique infused with the benefit of precise application of quantitative measurements was thought to contribute towards the steady accumulation of data for the purposes of formulating basic principles and educational axioms encompassing 'instructional techniques, curriculum construction, personnel policies and building management' (Lagemann, 2000, p.71) in order to enact a method of efficient administration of education practice. The statistical method found its place within matters of educational inquiry not only through the emergence of educational administration as a distinct academic 'field of professional study' (Lagemann, 2000, p.80) but also through the accepted idea that objective evidence performed by an untainted and acknowledged expert is best for the advancement of educational knowledge particularly from within the area of instructional practice as it relates directly to the achievement and academic progress of students. The utilisation of surveys and testing as tools of measurement within the field of education and more broadly for the practice of teaching may be historically located to within a belief in the certainty and verisimilitude of positivist research techniques.

Instrumentalist positivist inquiry then within education resides in the belief that 'valid knowledge can only be established by reference to that which is manifested in experience' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.61). It adopts a 'hypothetico-deductive' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.63) approach, which is generally represented by three characteristics encompassing in the first instance proposal of a hypothesis followed by deduction from the hypothesis and finally the assessment of the deduction by observation

from experiment or trial (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.63). Implicit in the methodological processes of positivist inquiry is firstly that claims of knowledge ‘must stand or fall by the results of observation and experiment’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.63) and as such knowledge obtained in this way is “value neutral” and free of personal and ideological bias. Secondly, matters of educational theory must ‘conform to the logical requirements of scientific explanations’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.65). Thus, the application of the scientific research method to matters of educational practice seek an explanation of some event or situation and makes a rational attempt at explaining some persistent educational situation. Consequently, the hypothetico-deductive method incorporates explanation to assist in explicating and demystifying a causal basis to an event that is not only testable through experiment but is verifiable through application of empirical content. Moreover, ‘nomic necessity’ (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.65) which attempts to explain why some event occurs or why some feature persists, seeks universal application in terms of explanation. The relevance of the scientific research technique in matters of educational theory and practice is in the symmetrical relationship between explanation and prediction (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.66). In essence, the scientific research method is thought to provide a workable basis upon which sound educational decisions can be made for it is through the predictive and explanatory powers of scientific inquiry and method that particular educational situations can be modified in order to realize a specific educational outcome.

A CASE STUDY

Comparison of class/teacher effects and school-level effects typify the simplistic and “moment in time” summary of research methods utilising quantitative statistical collation techniques. Table 1 below shows the class/teacher and school-level effects of student achievement from eight countries.

Table 1: Composition of class/teacher effects and school-level effects in eight countries

Country	Class/Teacher Effects (%)	School Effects (%)
Canada	17	9
Finland	45	0
France	16	6
Israel	21	8
New Zealand	42	0
Scotland	31	5
Sweden	45	0
USA	45	9

Source: Scheerens et al in Rowe (2003, p.18)

The figures purport to indicate the class/teacher effects in comparison to the school-effects of student learning outcomes. At face value the figures indicate that class/teacher effects do indeed appear to have a far more significant effect upon student educational achievement and so learning outcomes than the figures associated with school effects. However, closer inspection of the figures reveals a somewhat different picture. Table 2 below represents the actual table from which table 1 was adapted.

Table 2: Number of students, teachers, schools and classes per school for selected countries

Country	Students	Teachers	Schools	Classes per school
Belgium (Fl)	3282	150	150	1
Belgium (Fr)	1558	83	82	1
Canada (Br.Col.)	2228	87	87	1
Canada (Ont)	4597	170	106	>1
Finland	4484	206	98	>1
France	8230	338	174	>1
Hong Kong	5548	125	125	1
Hungary	1754	70	70	1
Israel	2540	93	68	>1
Japan	8091	212	212	1
Luxembourg	2106	107	42	> 1
Netherlands	5500	236	236	1
New Zealand	5252	193	100	>1
Scotland	853	274	58	>1
Sweden	3571	186	97	>1
Thailand	3806	98	98	1
USA	6792	277	157	>1
Total	70192	2910	1960	*

Source: Scheerens et al, 1989, p.791.

The figures in table 2 are part of the second international mathematics study (SIMS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The study is comprised of a cross-sectional and longitudinal component. The longitudinal component of the test consisted of collecting pre and post test data at the beginning and end of the school year (year 8). The cross-sectional component consisted of collecting data at the end of the school year. Student achievement data was collected by administering a multiple choice test comprising 154 items.

Table 1 is comprised of countries in which more than one class per school was tested, although the exact number of classes tested per school is not provided. Table 2 not only includes data in which more than one class per school was tested but data in which only one class per school was tested thus making any comment on those particular countries with respect to class/teacher and school related effects difficult and unwise. Table 1 figures too perhaps do not indicate all that much either. Behind the figures in table 1 is an elaborate and systematised mathematical series of statistical modelling that incorporated a set of learning effectiveness variables. In limiting the discussion within this paper to teacher and instructional characteristics, the analysis conducted by Scheerens et al that forms table 2 lists several factors that comprise teacher characteristics. These include, experience as a mathematics teacher in years, time spent on keeping order in minutes per week and time spent on teaching in minutes per week. Instructional characteristics include, the total time in hours spent on homework, the use of published tests and the use of teacher made tests (Scheerens et al, 1989, p.792). Scheerens et al in their discussion of table 2 recognise the inherent difficulties associated with statistical modelling and caution against making generalized statements about teacher and instructional effectiveness although, they are of the belief that particular forms of teacher behaviour such as positive expectations of student

achievement appear to have a high association with respect to student achievement (Scheerens, et al, 1989, p.797). In an overall sense, the data analysed by Scheerens et al from the SIMS showed that more variance occurred within classrooms rather than between schools but what is also worth noting about the Scheerens et al study is that the distinction between type of schools, that is government or independent is not mentioned. Interestingly, the Scheerens study is presented as a generalized data representation and is suggestive of possible instructional and school based indicators that may affect student learning outcomes. By no means is it a definitive study encapsulating teacher and instructional characteristics thought to maximise learning outcomes and educational attainment as presented by the author of table 1 from which table 2 was adapted.

A BOURDIEUIAN STANDPOINT

The work of Pierre Bourdieu examines educational practice vis-à-vis teaching and the work and role of the teacher in the educational process from within the domain or field of education. His work within education focuses upon the practice of education and the role that schools and more importantly schooling systems have in reproducing social and cultural inequities and moreover, the forces at work within systems of schooling that legitimate and influence particular cultural and social practices through in many respects dominant cultural beliefs and practices within education. Action or practice for Bourdieu is multi-faceted and is composed of many parts, each part or component acting in its own way upon the process of endeavour. Research activity in its quest for knowledge, in this case, a quest for knowledge about the question of educational attainment and the processes and teacher or classroom actions that facilitate and enhance it, should if it is to capture all related causes that affect learning, establish a reference point that acknowledges its limitations. A Bourdieuan research approach recognises the ‘limits of objectivist knowledge’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.3) in that objectivist science fuses the models of reality with realities of the model ignoring the descriptive aspects of objectivist methodology in describing practical action as ‘if it were the case’ (Bourdieu in Swartz, 1997, p.59). In simple terms, an uncritical application of formalistic and objectivistic research method will result in the projection of ‘formal properties of theory onto the informal world of everyday practices’ (Swartz, 1997, p.59), which results in the further symbolic domination of groups.

In aiming to study and examine the science of practice or in this case the science of educational practice in relation to teacher and classroom factors that affect learning, objectivist science needs to ‘construct the principle which makes it possible to account for all the cases observed’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.11) remembering that the theoretical objectivist construction utilised remains an approximation to the actual everyday practice of action. A practical logic which scientific and objectivist research theory epitomises must ultimately through its inquiry reduce and confine all ‘perceptions and actions’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.87) to a limited whole, generally by way of a few ‘generative principles’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.87) for the ‘sake of simplicity’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.87). Bourdieu’s approach to the theory of

practice is mindful of interdependent aspects within a situation that often are difficult to clarify and moreover, may in effect be conducive to analysis, particularly to a limited kind of objective analysis, hampered by an apparent dis-attachment to the inherent interplay of agent(s) within the “everyday”. The purely scientific and objectivist standpoint represents the social world ‘as a spectacle’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.96) and the research observer removed from the everyday practice, develops a ‘point of view on the action’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.96) under observation understanding it merely as a set of ‘interactions’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.96) usually based upon a narrow and limited form of ‘symbolic exchanges’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p.96). Moreover, a purely objectivist and scientific approach to practice places limits upon and within a situation to be analysed and the boundaries enacted restrict the research inquiry to that which is ‘required by the needs of practice’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.96). Thus, the dis-attached objectivist research observer gazes at a situation through an ‘economy of logic’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.87) that selectively adjusts aspects of practice in order to distinguish between ‘properties that are pertinent from those that are not’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p.90) in order to arrive at a supposedly informed position on the question and matter under consideration.

Bourdieu’s inquiry technique recognises and is mindful of structured social and economic differences and inequities thus critically examining aspects of research inquiry such as the purely objectivist approach whose relevance is in essentially articulating dominant modes of educational practice and policy through a simplistic presentation of levels of educational attainment and associated teacher effects to the learning situation. The chosen research technique often says more about itself than the supposed knowledge gained from its deliberations and Bourdieu insists upon consideration of the difficulties faced when ‘the very essence of what we want to know may reside in silences or absences, especially in documents’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.128). Bourdieu’s reflexive objectivity is introduced for the purpose of comprehensibility and amounts to a reflexive action the aim of which is to illustrate and examine the nature of the ‘researcher’s social relationship to the object of study’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.128) which is itself an important and necessary element of study. Its relevance is in exposing the ‘nature of the sources and maintenance of one’s interest’ (Grenfell and James, 1998, p.128) in the research inquiry chosen. The Bourdieuan notion of reflexivity represents an important stage in the research process as it allows for the exposition of the ‘conditions of production of the product’ (Bourdieu in Grenfell and James, 1998, p.125) juxtaposed by the considered acknowledgment of ‘doxa’ (Bourdieu, 1972, p.164), or that which is concealed or not readily perceptible in the first instance.

Bourdieuian method then attempts to overcome the apparent objective/subjective divide through recognising that individuals as active agents find themselves situated within structured contexts of a historical, political, economic and social nature that contributes to their daily interaction within specific fields of conduct and action. These fields are active sites of power and often exist as an imposed and dominant form of conditionings that mould and frame agent behaviour or habitus (Thompson, 1991, p.12). Teachers and education researchers as active agents within the field of education adopt by virtue

of involvement, particular dispositions that formalize 'practices, perceptions and attitudes' (Thompson, 1991, p.12) contributing to dominant modes of hierarchically organised educational systems.

CONCLUSION

In summary and by way of conclusion, this paper has sought to mount an argument and bring forth discussion on the issue of teacher and instructional effectiveness through consideration of what may be viewed as claims of crisis in public education. The argument made within the paper centres upon recent education policy development which positions the work and role of the teacher not only as the most important and pivotal factor in the maximisation of student learning outcomes, but as the primary focus of and foundational imperative in enhancing educational attainment. Teachers are now positioned in a political and economic context that focuses upon a culture of performativity and as such it is argued are the targets of educational reform insofar as it is teachers as active agents within the system of education that exertion in the form of control can be enacted. Moreover, a particular form of educational debate and current education policy development is supported by a research method that lends itself to simplistic and matter of fact interpretations of the educational situation as it stands in relation to poor levels of educational accomplishment. Superficial and inadequate analysis and treatment of often complex matters that impinge upon the learning situation require a research technique with the necessary capabilities to continually question and critically examine aspects of educational practice from a perspective that offers some scope for possible change at the policy level in order to validly assess systemic impacts on educational attainment.

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