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What we say can betray what we want

KAREN STARR says that educators need to be more aware about the terms they use to describe schools and children. Sometimes what is said can betray the outcomes that are sought.

EDUCATORS have been working towards ‘making a difference’ through achieving equitable learning outcomes for a very long time (see Connell, Ashenden et al., 1982). However, not only do we still have a long way to travel to achieve these aims (see OECD, 2003 & 2008; Teese and Polesel, 2003), we still haven’t found suitable terminology to describe equity activities.

Focus on vocabulary

In this article I am not focusing on the actual activities undertaken to achieve more equitable schooling outcomes. Rather, I am referring to the vocabulary we use, which in my view is in need of reform. I am particularly disturbed by references to ‘disadvantaged’ schools (see DfES, 2004) and ‘students at risk’ (see DEWA, 2010), although a range of negative descriptors can be found. Thomson (2002), for example, uses the terms ‘rustbelt’ schools and ‘rustbelt’ kids. MacBeath, Gray et al. (2006) refer to ‘schools on the edge’ and ‘schools in challenging circumstances’ - those described as ‘conspicuously adrift of the average school performance’.

The schools in focus through such references are often associated with ‘communities in poverty’ and ‘low SES’ (socio-economic status) students (see, for example, Palmer et al., 2005), further characterised by:

- a high proportion of students with special needs, low motivation, low self-esteem and poor attainment
- transient student populations
- high drop-out and low attendance rates
- enormous enrolment diversity (sometimes) (MacBeath, Gray et al., 2006; Palmer, Carr and Kenway, 2005).

‘Students at risk’ or ‘high risk students’ - ‘risk’ school failure and thwarted participation (see Slaven and Madden, 1987). Some argue that ‘students at risk’ pose further risk to schools and fellow students, making them ‘challenging’ or ‘on the edge’, by ‘causing trouble’, creating stress through bad behaviour and low academic achievement, and reducing aggregate school achievement, attendance and retention data (see Lamb, Walstab et al., 2004).

Damaging slippage

However, the way we speak about schools and students does them a huge disservice – an injustice. There is slippage between intentions, actions and language (see Foley, 1997). For example, labelling students ‘at risk’ infers disenfranchisement from ‘the
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Discursive shifts now evident

Thankfully, some discursive shifts are evident (although not all of these escape the same criticisms entirely, in my view). Phrases such as ‘educational disadvantage’ (see DIES, 2004), ‘students at risk’ (see DEWA, 2010) and ‘inequality of opportunity’ (Selden, 1999) are being left behind and rejected – the latter because it is now recognised that providing the same educational offerings and opportunities has not worked as an equity strategy. Thomson (2002), for example, discusses educational outcomes within local and broader structural contexts in order to understand what creates and maintains ‘difference’ and ‘marginalisation’ – in a similar vein to Hayes et al. (2006). The OECD (2008) uses the concepts of ‘social capital’ (the social ‘glue’ of shared values, norms and understandings that facilitate cooperation amongst groups, which foster access to networks, and a sense of social belonging and trust) to describe inequities. MacBeath and Gray et al. (2007) argue that ‘social capital theory helps us to gain a better understanding of attitudes to school learning when we extend our line of sight from school to community, to the local living environment, to housing and social services, employment opportunities, health and crime levels’, and explain how circumstances such as unemployment change individuals’ perspectives, and emphasise differences of opinion about what’s important, which influence a school’s dynamics. ‘Social justice’ in schooling places the emphasis on teaching and systems. Hayes et al. (2006) define this as ‘a more equal distribution of the capacities and capabilities developed through education needs to be a goal of socially just schooling’ (see also Starr, 1991). Gale (2005) and Thomson (2002) endorse the notion of ‘doing justice’ in education, and MCEETYA (2008) talks about ‘equity’ and ‘closing the gap’ – all of which attempt to avoid implicit derision when talking about schools and students.

Unintended distancing

As educators, we can unwittingly distance ourselves from students and parent communities through the language we use. For example, Thomson (2002) noticed how professionals in her study of ‘rustbelt’ schools commonly referred to ‘these students’, ‘this school’, ‘this community’ – demarcating points of difference, an out-of-the-ordinariness that marginalises students and parents, which she refers to as ‘thisness’.

The language we use embodies the broad-sweeping cultural politics surrounding persistent equity issues in education. If governments are adamant that we actually do make a difference through education, then the language we use – which ironically, is often spearheaded by policy discourse – needs to be one of many considerations for change. Definitions and descriptors need be questioned; alongside the internal logic behind the problems they seek to describe and address. Changing discursive practices is one part of a much bigger task, but if we are really interested in ‘doing justice’, then this might be a good place to start.

*A comprehensive list of references for this article is available from the author.

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