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Internal Contradictions within the UK Education Policy Discourse

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Background

There has been extensive research literature examining the impact of ICT into schools since election of the New Labour Government in 1997. Throughout this same period there have also been surveys of this literature. This is not surprising as the funding streams supporting this aspect of education policy throughout the period has been enormous. There is much critical work in this area where researchers doubt that the impact of the ICT has been as promised by those proposing, making and supporting the policies.

However, even in the research that is critical of the introduction of ICT into schools, this work tends to be uncritical of the role that the policy discourse plays as a vehicle for justifying the introduction of ICT into schools. There is, after all, little doubt that the enormous funding streams have been justified by the policy discourse.

Research Questions

This paper examines the policy discourse in the introduction of ICTs into UK Secondary Schools developed by the New Labour Government since it came into power in 1997. In particular the paper asks 'What concepts can be used to explain the influence of the policies? Are these Educational concepts? If not, does this make a difference?'

Methods

The research takes a case study approach this particular case study is what Stake calls an 'instrumental' rather than an 'intrinsic' case study (Stake 1994). Policy documents used by key mediaries working within a particular area, at a particular time in English Secondary Schools when working to introduce ICTs into their English Secondary schools are analysed. The documents are subjected to a detailed critical discourse analysis using Banister's stepped approach (Banister et al 1994) and then the discourses are further analysed using Bell's tri-partite theory of realms and their Axial principles to establish constraints on introducing ICTs into secondary schools. This reveals elements that are often hidden in the dominant discourse.

Frame

There is a philosophical/sociological component to this investigation whereby I follow a common assumption that the policies introducing ICTs are based upon notions about the importance of ICTs generally in modern society. This notion (ICTs are defining technologies of modern society) is assumed to derive from (contested) versions of Post Industrial Society (PI). I therefore outline three dominant versions of PI, using the framework developed by Kumar (2005) i. PI as Information Society (Bell), ii. PI as Post Fordism (Ball) and iii. PI as Postmodern Society. Each position defines constraints/possibilities of how ICTs might impact on schools.

This paper attempts to test a (hugely contested) constraint of Bell's theory that even enthusiasts for Bell have chosen to ignore/dismiss. Bell argues that there are domains that ICTs cannot effect. This is an aspect of his theorizing that is considered too implausible, even by enthusiasts for his theory. 'If the coming of the information society is, as all claim, as revolutionary a change as the coming of industrial society, then one would surely expect profound changes to occur throughout all society, and not simply - as Bell would have it - in the 'techno-economic structure' (Kumar, p 13).

Bell claims that change in technology is about greater efficient technologies replacing less efficient ones, for example the horse is replaced by the combustion engine. The process is linear. In the realm of culture, however, change and progress are not comparable to the technological process. Beckett does not replace Shakespeare but rather joins in with and deepens both our understanding of Shakespeare and in turn is deepened and understood better through engagement with Shakespeare. The process is *ricorso*, a process of continuous returning. Further, there is no possibility of linear displacement or replacement. This paper suggests that education is more like culture than technology and therefore it can't be hooked on to any developing technological innovations. The meanings of education, of teaching and learning practice and value are not bound up with technological innovation of any sort. So ICTs are strictly irrelevant in the determination of educational value.

Research findings

The central claim that ICTs could transform education and schools was one that Bell's theoretical construct of PI problematised at a different level than has been reflected in the literature. There is much evidence that schools have not been transformed in anything like the way the literature supposed it would/will be. But none of the literature suggested that it couldn't be.

Bell's overlooked, ignored or ridiculed notion of the three realms and the cultural contradictions that they engendered and thus the questions they posed seemed relevant to the whole discussion about ICT and its effects on education.

ICTs, just like any other tool, can be used to support or hinder these values. But to transform education it is educational values, not technological innovations that are important.

Similarly, arguments that certain educational values are advanced by ICTs seems to mistake ICT providing a new educational context with developing a new educational form. Constructionist education, for instance, often cited as the pedagogical theory most favored by techno-enthusiasts, is not dependent at all on ICT. Historically of course Piaget, Mead and Vygotsky and so on developed their educational theories long before ICTs became important.

The division of realms invites proponents of ICT in schools to stare less at the technology and focus on the values and processes of education independently. It suggests that recent discussion about the importance of 'meaningful engagement' with ICT is responding to the understanding that merely having access to ICT is not transformative. This is the argument that 'access' needs defining in a richer way than merely those that have and those that have not.

The paper summarises the findings of the discourse analysis and the application of the findings to Bell's schema. What the paper concludes is that whether or not Bell's theory is well regarded as sociology it has been influential in the framing of justifications for establishing ICTs presence in education and its peculiar status in current educational policies.