

## **PUTTING TEACHERS AND COMMUNITIES INTO POLICY RECLAMATION: COUNTERING EDUCATIONAL ‘DISCOURSES OF DECEIT’**

### INTRODUCTION

February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 will go down as a landmark in Australia’s history. On this day, before a packed parliamentary gallery in the nation’s capital, Canberra, the incoming Labor Party Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologized to indigenous people for the grievous harm inflicted on them by successive Commonwealth government policies. Since European occupation in 1788 indigenous Australians have been dispossessed of their lands, separated from their families and communities, decimated through frontier violence and diseases, subjected to gross violations of their culture and heritage and pushed to the margins of society. Today the living standards of many Aboriginal people are more akin to third world conditions as evidenced in the huge gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities. In uttering the word ‘sorry’ to Aboriginal people, Kevin Rudd did what his predecessor, John Howard, had been unwilling to do for more than a decade of conservative rule, despite the disturbing findings of a national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). Acknowledging the need to right the wrongs of the past, Rudd proclaimed:

We apologize for the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologize especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their community and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of the stolen generations, their descendants and their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. (Hansard, 2008, p. 1)

Although many Australians view this apology as merely a symbolic gesture and argue for more practical measures to ameliorate injustices and inequalities, its significance should not be underestimated. A key feature of Rudd’s address was his confession that the lawmakers of the land, not the administrators, missionaries and

settlers, must ultimately be held accountable for the injustices experienced by indigenous peoples.

The uncomfortable truth for us all is that the parliaments of the nation, individually and collectively, enacted statutes and delegated authority under those statutes that made the forced removal of children on racial grounds fully lawful ... We, the parliaments of the nation, are ultimately responsible, not those who gave effect to our laws. And the problem lay with the laws themselves. (Hansard, 2008, p. 3)

We have dwelt on the apology to highlight the gross injustices facing indigenous people and to reveal the complicity of governments in sanctioning racist policies and practices. The Prime Minister's words serve as a salutary reminder that, although public policies may leave spaces for more benevolent and humane courses of action, they nonetheless set parameters within which individuals, groups and institutions are predisposed to conduct themselves. Discussing contemporary education policy, Ball (2006c) observes:

Policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed or particular goals are set. (p. 21)

The uncomfortable truth is that many education policies enacted by neoliberal governments in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere, have narrowed the options and changed educational goals to the point where they are damaging not only the wellbeing of young people (especially those in economically disadvantaged communities), but are having a detrimental effect on the overall economic and social health of these societies. Increasingly, the roles of schools are being redefined in response to economic imperatives, rather than a commitment to social justice, equity and the common good. According to Fielding (2006, p. 349), lack of a 'philosophic compass' to guide education policy has led to a deepening crisis in the United Kingdom as notions of effectiveness, performativity, accountability and managerialism have taken hold. We contend that these trends are apparent in many Western countries, including Australia. Countering the 'discourse of deceit' (p. 356) embedded in these reforms demands a reorientation of educational philosophy and practices so that schools become far more creative, humane and personally fulfilling places for young people and their teachers. In Fielding's words, they must become person-centered learning communities.

In this chapter we want to engage in some policy reclamation by exploring democratic, community-oriented and socially critical alternatives to market-driven and functionalist approaches to schooling. We acknowledge that contesting dominant ideologies is difficult in a policy environment that muffles the voices of teachers and students, rides roughshod over local communities, and refuses to engage with (let alone tackle) the 'savage inequalities' described by Kozol (1992) in his searing expose of the extremes of wealth and poverty in America's school system. Nonetheless, from our studies in Australia and accounts from the United