Karakia Timatanga, Mihi followed by the following Opening Provocation:

Recently I was involved in a discussion around the role of critical theory in teacher education with colleagues with the debate about when to introduce critical theory (some saying not until year three for teacher education students). I was abhorrent at the thought that we may possibly just be domesticating our students - and made the comment “but we were enacting a theory of critical pedagogy in Kōhanga Reo”. However I do not think that was taken seriously so I got to setting about ideologically clarifying and proving how we did that - so I turned to my doctoral thesis – and my writing around critical literacy with pre-school children. What captured me was the journey I went on – and so I am driven to talk a little about that today – commencing with this quote from an article titled Can Democratic Education Survive in a Neoliberal Society?” by Henry A. Giroux

If teachers are truly concerned about how education operates as a crucial site of power in the modern world, they will have to take more seriously how pedagogy functions on local and global levels to secure and challenge the ways in which power is deployed, affirmed, and resisted within and outside traditional discourses and cultural spheres.

–Giroux (2012b)

In other words if teachers are truly concerned about making a difference in children’s lives, truly concerned about children’s agency, about children’s power to take control over their own learning, about teaching and learning as a democratic right, then teachers must learn how to resist the external controls which coerce them – which force them into becoming technicians, not educators. Teachers now, more than ever before, need to exert their powers of critical thinking of alertness, of political nouse - As Paolo Freire once said “Teaching is a political act” (Freire, 1972).

Of course after the resonance of such an article I had to delve deeper – and I want to speak briefly on this article by Henry Giroux, and another titled “The Disappearance of Public Intellectuals” (Giroux, 2012a); because of how these articles – set in a global context –
reveal with clarity the neoliberal context or resonate with what is happening to us here in Aotearoa, felt here in the university but also, and we all know this, in schools and the early childhood centres.

The first of these articles deals with the politics of economic Darwinism (which inspired my title The politics of pedagogical Darwinism). I have taken the politics of economic Darwinism and transposed them into what it means in terms of pedagogy, educational settings and practice at the chalk face.

Economic Darwinism, according to Giroux (2012a), - is the situation where economics drives politics, transforming citizens into consumers society into a stock exchange, where long term societal investments are de-railed are now replaced by short term profits - and where compassion and concern for others are viewed as a weakness. Just take for example the past 150 years of long term investments into our whole infrastructure, all the State owned enterprises now being up for sale - NZ rail, NZ post, NZ telephone exchange, - already derailed – and hospitals, parks and prisons, seashores, rivers, power companies – even schools – all heading towards privatisation.

As the language of privatization, deregulation, and commodification replaces the discourse of the ‘public good’, all things public, including public schools, particularly public schools – hugely important sites – but also libraries, transportation systems, crucial infrastructures, and
public services, are viewed either as a drain on the market or as a pathology (Giroux, 2012b) and systematically divested or privatised.

Individual prosperity becomes the greatest of social achievements. According to Giroux (2012c) vulnerable populations once protected by the social state are now considered a liability because they are viewed as either flawed consumers or present a threat to the politics of the right. They constitute a form of human waste and are considered disposable (we’ll just create more prisons, privatise them and turn them into chain gains linked to schools which become the pipelines for many – straight into the chain gangs of labour to support the private estate) because they are thought of as, “unworthy of sharing in the rights, benefits, and protections of a substantive democracy” (Giroux, 2012a). Further, this new politics of disposability and the competitive culture of capitalistic greed represent more than an economic crisis, but speak to a deeply rooted crisis in education, and social justice.

After Giroux’s economic Darwinism (the economic fight of the fittest where we laud those who make it to the top of the rich list) I would argue that a situation of pedagogical Darwinism is occurring - where not only the economy drives all into hierarchies (pyramid shaped), it drives the political context of education and educational policy; not only turning people into consuming machines but converting children into stocks, human capital - those disposable units that I spoke of. Is that what we want? Recently in another forum I asked the question - Is education about processing people, or is it a people process?

Giroux (2012a) also argued that we are witnessing the “disappearance of critical intellectuals and the collapse of those public spheres which offer a sense of critical agency and social imagination. In other words we are becoming global clones.

The frame for public education is this corporate-based ideology embraces

- standardizing the curriculum (and its associated measure - standardized assessments)
- top-to-down governing structures (and their associated arrangements - devaluing of community and silencing the ranks),
courses that promote entrepreneurial values (with an almost fanatical focus on I.T. promoting literacy and numeracy programs) and

the reduction of all levels of education to job training sites (well say no more!!)

I could go on - suffice to say that I agree that the corporate model displays a deep disdain for the ideals of a humanising education and wellbeing (totally at odds with our very own Māori Education Framework) – it is, as is suggested, entirely related to market dollars and the production of human capital ready to keep the corporate clock ticking over. But that clock really is a time bomb – one just has to witness its portends daily on the news to see how;

- global warming
- the global financial meltdowns
- wars
- job losses
- environmental disasters
- corporate con artists (blue chip people)
- bank bail outs
- government asset sales - (water, sea shore - the list goes on)

These all propose a threat to democracy. Giroux (2012a) talks about Edward Said – saying that

Before his untimely death, Edward Said, himself an exemplary public intellectual, urged his colleagues in the academy to directly confront those social hardships that disfigure contemporary society and pose a serious threat to the promise of democracy. He urged them to assume the role of public intellectuals, wakeful and mindful of their responsibilities to bear testimony to human suffering and the pedagogical possibilities at work in educating students [children] to be autonomous, self-reflective, and socially responsible. Said rejected the notion of a market-driven pedagogy, one that created cheerful robots and legitimated organized recklessness and illegal legalities. (p.2)

In opposition to such a pedagogy of recklessness (that is the creation of robotic domesticated clones or young people with an inability to read the world), Said argued for what he called a ‘pedagogy of wakefulness’ and its related concern with the politics of critical engagement. That is ever important - critical engagement - because that’s how we get transformation.
Now here is where I started – the debate about critical theory - critical engagement – and a theory of change. At the heart of Kaupapa Māori theory is the pedagogy of critical engagement for transformation. Kaupapa Māori theory is ‘critical’ and hence my statement that we were enacting a theory of transformation, of critical education, in Kōhanga Reo – which is all about shifting world views and shifting the discourses as we sit on the horizon. A failure to understand the critical nature of education is a retrenchment to a pedagogy of domestication - a pedagogy of hierarchy (complete with sovereigns and slaves) and a pedagogy of Darwinism. Do we want to domesticate our children – or educate them? What planet are we on? – Again - is education a people process, or about processing people?

These are critical questions. Critical because we now have new limits opening up with new horizons, new possibilities of experience - daily!!! We are in a constant state of flux, and, dare I say it, crisis. We have to cultivate resilience and the courage to face the risks in times of crisis - and often in the face of adversity.

We Māori know only too well what it is like to sit, to live, on the horizons of an enigmatic future - where our language and concepts are on the brink - and yet embrace a radical hope for the future of our tamariki. We cling to a pedagogy of hope when we actively promote our language and Māori world views. Matariki is now on the horizon.

And as we celebrate the new horizons of our world through Matariki, we prepare celebrate what we have, what we might imagine, our freedom of to discourse the world. As Shakespeare once said “Bid me discourse And I will enchant thine ear” so I turn here to such a radical pedagogy through alternative speak.

I’m going to talk now about storytelling as pedagogy drawing on discourses around Rūaumoko (Rūaimoko rānei), our earthmother’s unborn child. Robyn Kahukiwa’s book ‘Taniwha’ helped to shape a project around Papatūānuku and her unborn child, Rūaimoko. This project was carried out with young children around six years of age – 6-7. Robyn Kahukiwa is a great storyteller (and artist) who is able to draw from our Māori worldviews.
and connect those with literature for ongoing storytelling – making it the experience of those who are listening — so that they can emerge with renewed insights and understandings – so that her story becomes their story so to speak, in that it becomes their shared experience. This story book became an important part of the project — because of what we have been experiencing in Christchurch around the series of earthquakes that have been ongoing. To briefly background these children involved in this project – not all are speakers of Māori. Many are just beginning the journey – a few do have some fluency – there is a real mix of language abilities–but with the emergent speakers when there are world-view shifts they are acutely apparent. This book forms the basis of this video clip – and underpinned the whole project around Papatūānuku our earth mother and her unborn child Rūaumoko. So much so that this clip now an absolute favourite within the classroom.

PLAY VIDEO (Ruaumoko/Ruaimoko) by Maisey Rika and Anika Moa (Youtube)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvFD3allwZU

While they were in the middle of this particular project, the teacher noticed a little girl digging out in the grounds. When the teacher asked what the little girl was doing she replied “I am digging down to Rūaumoko –I can see Rūaumoko’s skin”. In further discussion with a whanau member – another child was going to dig down to talk to Ruaumoko and when his Mum asked “ how are you going to talk to Ruamoko?” He said “you get a big big spade and dig o all the way down – Mum said “that will take quite a long time wouldn't it? Child said – “ok - Ive got another idea - we'll get a microphone and put that down there [to have a conversation with Ruamoko]”.

The project transformed discourses, views and the physical space of the classroom. This is what you call critical literacy – because it is connected to children’s lives, their experiences and their ways of thinking about them in a new becoming– a demonstration of story-telling provoking a shift in awareness, increasing the intelligible link to children’s affective domains and responses – from the tremor (and terror) of earthquakes to the sanctity and renewed respect (and searching for) Rūaumoko –

• of storytelling facilitating critical discussion,
• of children and teacher and community in dialogue,
• of children’s exploration and problem solving
• of children’s stories through their creations
of the feminization of phenomena, healing and sanctity -

and therein lies my provocation - how do we maintain the sanctity of a radical pedagogy for social justice - for what ethically we know to be a right for all of our children - to be free thinkers, to be embracing of life at the horizon with the surety of their own agency – how we do that within Darwinistic pedagogies?

Kia hora te marino
Kia whakapapa pounamu te moana
Kia tere te kārohirohi ki mua i a koe
Haumi e, hui e, tāiki e

May the seas be calm and glisten like greenstone
And may the shimmer of summer dance across and light up the pathway ahead

Photograph taken by M. Skerrett from ancestral lands at Koukourarata

Waiata whakamutunga – E tū Kahikatea
References


