Careering down the wrong path: (Re)positioning career education as a socially just practice

About the author – Barrie A. Irving

Before moving to New Zealand I worked in the UK for over 20 years as a practitioner, academic and researcher in the careers arena. I am now a PhD student at the University of Otago College of Education where I am looking at how social justice is understood in the context of career education policies, programmes and practices in New Zealand secondary schools. If you are a careers teacher in a secondary school and might be interested in participating in my research, please email me for further details at: irvba060@student.otago.ac.nz

Introduction

One of the difficulties encountered as a researcher in the area of career education is that whilst there is much discussion of career in the literature, there is a lack of academic research concerning career education. Where studies do exist, many are practitioner focused, evaluations of particular initiatives or programmes, and/or reviews of practice. Rarely are question raised about the role, purpose, and focus of career education. More importantly, little attention has been paid to issues of social justice within the context of career education. Therefore in this paper I do not aim to provide answers but, drawing from the literature and the findings from my recent pilot study, I am seeking to encourage thought and critical reflection about the place of social justice within career education, and how it might inform our practices as career educators. To achieve this, the paper is structured around the following questions: what do we mean by 'social justice'; how does the notion of social justice fit with career education; what key findings emerged from my pilot study, and how do these relate to the career literature; what are the key issues for career education, and career educators; what might 'good practice' look like.

What do we mean by social justice?

Social justice is a slippery concept (Griffiths, 1998) and, notes Rizvi (1998), "the immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning" (p.47). Whilst the term 'social justice' has become commonplace and is now widely used, this in itself is problematic as it is open to multiple interpretations. Added to this lack of conceptual clarity is the way in which social justice encompasses a much broader understanding of the social, economic, and political world than notions of equality of opportunity. Gale (2000) a useful categorisation of social justice, identifying three models: retributive, distributive, and recognitive. For the purposes of this paper I work with a fourth model, critical social justice (see Irving, 2009a) which is derived from the work of Young (1990), and is further informed by critical pedagogy and post-structuralism. It is my contention that this model should be used to underpin career education policy, inform the development of programmes, and feature prominently in practice.

Critical social justice is derived from Young's (1990) theory of recognitive justice, and further informed by critical pedagogy and post-structural perspectives. It goes beyond concerns with simple (in)equalities as it "take(s) into account the complex nature and messiness of social, political and economic relations" (Irving, 2009a). Therefore, as Young (1990) comments, "a critical theory of social justice must consider not only distributive patterns, but also the processes and relationships that produce those patterns" (p.241). Thus a critical model of social justice exists as a part of, rather than apart from, the complex nexus of social, economic and political relations (Gale & Densmore, 2003). As such, it is concerned with issues of power, oppression, group recognition, distribution, knowledge construction, the processes and practices of schooling, and the development of a critical reflexive 'self'. Encompassed within this is the importance attached to critical and constructive dialogue (Young, 2005) which enables the members of socially and culturally constituted groups to explore, examine and critique their own practices, and those of others (Parekh, 2000; Parker-Jenkins, Hartas & Irving, 2005) thereby "acknowled[ing] the

relationship [between] culture, knowledge, and power" (Giroux, cited in Hytten, 2006, p.223). Within this model there is also a recognition that identity is not 'fixed', nor simply ascribed from above, but is multiple, ever-shifting and contradictory (Scott, 1992: Nairn & Higgins, 2007).

How does a theory of critical social justice 'fit' with career education?

It is important to note that little attention has been given to issues of equity, equality, diversity and social justice in relation to career education, either in the international literature (see Harris, 1999; Ruff, 2001; Malik & Aguado, 2005), or in reviews of practice in New Zealand (see Education Review Office, 2006; Vaughan & Gardiner, 2007; Watts, 2007). From a practitioner perspective, Guichard (2001) observes from his review of career education in a number of countries that

> "(c)areer education practices only rarely aim at enhancing equality of opportunity, of lessening *social inequity* or enhancing collective development actions… [it focuses] on the individual [and] tends to ignore society or community" (p.166).

I would suggest that, in part, this is a result of the confusion that surrounds concepts of career, and the role of career education. This is highlighted by Patton & McMahon (2006), Australian academics in the career counselling field, who comment that "(T)he meaning and definition of career is still understood differentially. This lack of conceptual clarity maintains ambiguity and continues to prevent a common ground in thinking in this area" (p.4). When considered alongside the fact that career education is also an under-researched curriculum area there is little surprise that, as career educators, we lean towards the pragmatic. Unfortunately, in relation to career education, the pragmatic tends to be driven by the government priorities of the day (Ruff, 2001). 'Common-sense' explanations abound, rather than a deeper and more meaningful understanding of 'career', and the contribution of 'career education' to human development within the context of a critical 'socially just' curriculum and pedagogy.

So where do we go from here? Whilst it is important to recognise current shortcomings, the challenge we face as career educators is how to (re)construct an everyday 'popular' and historically derived term into an intellectual concept that can be utilised within an educational context. Whilst this is no easy task, Careers Services/rapuara (2007) provides us with the following helpful definitions:

Career: The sequence and variety of an individual's paid and unpaid work roles over a lifetime. More broadly it includes life roles, leisure activities, learning and work.

Career education: Planned learning experiences that help students to develop the understanding, skills and attitudes that will assist them to make informed choices and decisions about study and/or work options and to participate effectively in work *and* society (p.2, emphasis added).

When these definitions are examined it is clear that they acknowledge the 'career development' need to prepare students for decisions about study and /or work options, *and* recognise career as a holistic concept. In a holistic sense career thus relates to our sense of being with regards to 'who I am' and who 'we' are as New Zealanders and global citizens, and how 'I/we' construct our life-career(s). Learning about how 'I/we' can participate effectively in society brings with it a responsibility to explore how 'I/we' might also contribute to, and have an impact on, the shaping of our social, economic and political worlds. For me, this fits comfortably with a critical model of social justice that "encompasses a critical understanding of our sense(s) of identity; what it means to be a citizen; our sense of cultural belonging; how we frame our 'career(s)'; and how we construct our lives" (Irving, 2009b). As such, this provides a legitimacy and rationale that goes beyond adaptive and instrumental concerns. Through the fostering of critical insights into how social, economic, and political discourses position and shape concepts of 'self', 'opportunity', 'career', and 'justice', career education has the potential to provide students with learning experiences that will contribute to an understanding of their future roles as dynamic and democratic citizens and workers. Moreover, it can contribute to greater individual *and* collective empowerment

(Freire, 1996; Irving & Parker-Jenkins, 1995) as students become aware of their right to accept, question, challenge, or reject the values (in part or in full) that inform such concepts.

What key findings emerged from my pilot study, and how do these relate to the career and academic literature?

My pilot study was undertaken in a single-sex school in the South Island. Leigh (a pseudonym), had been employed in the private sector for a number of years before entering education, firstly as the unqualified school careers adviser, and then returning to the position as a trained teacher. From the analysis of my semi-structured interview with Leigh three dominant themes emerge which relate to my research question: 'how is the concept of social justice understood in career education'? The examples I give are drawn from more detailed and complex findings (see Irving, 2009b). Thus they should be viewed as indicative.

Sense- of-self

What we teach is influenced by how we see ourselves: past experiences inform our current practices and programmes. 'Careers' work is not a neutral activity as it reflects how our past & present inform the values we include in our programmes, and how 'official knowledge' is interpreted and normalised.

"Careers is all about social justice": seen in relation to a liberal-humanist discourse that focuses on individual self-awareness, and the acquisition of skills, knowledge and competencies which will enable students to "get to where they want… to fight for what they want in the right way". By recognising that "there are influences on them", it is suggested that (most) students can challenge and overcome these.

Negative external social influences restrict career identity/development/opportunity: for some students, external influences are more powerful influences than those of the school, and it is felt that career education can do little to change this. A deficit model unfolds as 'career' and 'community' are seen in isolation of/and in opposition to each other, exposing the perceived limitations of career.

Social class and equality of opportunity

Education & qualifications as currency: seen as "a key to open doors" and the pathway to opportunity and equality. Regarding "education as something that can never be taken away from you", it is positioned as a panacea to social class disadvantage, reflecting Leigh's own life experiences.

Knowledge is bounded and contextualised: although, in career education, "the value of contributing to society… and that sort of thing" is raised, this tends to be occupationally focused and apolitical in nature. Learning in other curriculum areas about how collective action can contribute to socially just change for example, is separated out from career learning, and not contextualised within career education. Leigh does reflect on whether the curriculum, measures of success, and access to resources and opportunities, are based on middle-class values, yet this remains unresolved.

Contradictory outcomes & class-based expectations: the practice of career education is bound up with the need to overcome personal barriers; accept individual responsibility; take control of your life; pursue your passions regardless of material (dis)advantage, encouraging students "to live the life they want". Yet beneath this, a range of moral, feminist and economic discourses prevail. For example, teenage pregnancy is associated with "that whole poverty and benefit trap", and ultimate disadvantage.

Parents, pacific culture and equality

Liberal values and cultural contexts: whilst it is recognised that parents are influential in the educational and occupational decisions made by their children, there is an apparent clash between those within the Pasifika community who wish to shape their child's future and hold particular occupations in high esteem, and the liberal-humanist values embedded within career education which positions choice as an individual act.

Walking the cultural line: to manage cultural dissonance and maintain an impartial stance, targeted career events are held for Pasifika families. Multiple ways forward are presented, reflecting both culturally acceptable expectations and alternative paths. Whilst these events seek to enhance community involvement, the underlying goal appears to be to change minds, reflecting the values of the career education programme that students receive, as much as to engage in dialogue and establish shared goals.

Acting in the child's best interests: there are conflicting values and expectations between school and home concerning 'who' acts in the best career interests of the child, and 'what' these interests should be. Pasifika parents are positioned as both a help and a hindrance, depending on how they respond to the expectations and values embedded within the career education philosophy and practices of the school.

What do these findings suggest?

These findings suggest that Leigh's life history, educational experiences, role as a mother, commitment to gender equality supporting the disadvantage, and being a 'white' middle-class woman has informed her understanding of social justice. Within the context of career education, this is mediated by the economic discourses of 'self-management', and ways in which career is positioned as an individual and rational act. Competencies, skills, and adaptive behaviours overshadow critical social justice concerns. Contradictions are evident as her desire to be socially just is set against the embedded values of educational achievement, individual responsibility and value laden expectations of how career is constituted. Given the isolated nature of the role, and limited time provided for careers work, there is little space for critical reflection and curriculum change.

"Are we careering down the wrong path"?

From a critical social justice perspective this question brings us full circle. Increasingly career education is positioned at the curriculum margins and being subsumed into a career development discourse, which means that programmes are focused on individual responsibility, 'self-management', employment skills, lifelong learning, and work-related competencies. This restricts opportunity for critical engagement by students with how 'career' might be constructed holistically, (in)equitable employment practices, how the economy operates, the impact of globalisation, and where social justice concerns fit. Moreover, there is also little scope for discussion about the interconnectedness of social class, race, culture, gender and (dis)ability in the distribution of opportunities; why some groups are marginalised by mainstream society; how and why oppression(s) and injustice(s) occur; and how these concerns might be exposed, questioned and challenged. Moreover, from a career counselling perspective, which been influential in the development of career education in New Zealand, McIlveen and Patton (2006) observe that there has been little critical discussion of, or reflection on, career development from within the profession. This lack of introspective examination, they contend, has led many career practitioners to "become unwitting or complicit instruments of a broader economic and political discourse" (p.15), a concern echoed by others (Colley, 2000; Irving & Marris, 2002; Hyslop-Margison & McKerracher, 2008).

Therefore I would argue the need to formulate a distinction between career education and career development, thus establishing areas of difference and overlap. This will require more than simply a 'juggling' of policy and practice, as teachers, students, parents *and* the wider community will need to be aware of why this is happening, and how these concepts differ. There are also implications for the training of career teachers. In simple terms I see career education as being concerned with enabling students to critically examine 'career' as a historically derived value laden concept that has been constructed in relation to socio-economic-political events. As such, it is subject to shifts and changes over time. Furthermore, providing opportunities for exploration and constructive dialogue, and through sharing our own experiences, we will assist students to explore the multiple discourses that contribute to the shaping and construction of their sense(s) of career identity and how it is influenced and understood. Career development, meanwhile, would be left free to focus on the skills, competencies and strategies to enable students to prepare *for* the challenges and demands of life in general, and the management of uncertain futures.

What might 'good practice' look like?

As part of my PhD research I am intending to develop, in partnership with my participants, a 'critical social justice framework for New Zealand career educators'. Therefore the following suggestions are by no means exhaustive but simply provide ideas/examples that you might draw from, develop, and add to.

Developing career material that is culturally sensitive through community participation. A culturally sensitive 'Muslim Girls' Careers Education Pack' (Irving et al., 2002) was developed collaboratively between a tertiary institution, a careers organisation, and representatives from the Muslim community.

Using co-operative based models for student enterprises. The aim is not to replace traditional models, but provide alternatives for students to utilise, and then examine, compare and contrast with standard business approaches and practices. Issues of (in)equalities and social (in)justice can also be explored.

Utilising case studies that critically explore issues of social justice in relation to gender/race/socio-economic class/culture/religion/(dis)ability, in a range of contexts. Such activities can help contribute to an understanding of ways in which 'career(s)' constructions might be influenced and informed by a range of social, economic and political factors, and the complex and multiple forms it might take.

Presenting alternative 'career options' for discussion that tend to occupy the economic margins. Being a trade unionist, and the positioning of such roles in the wider society; working as a social activist (e.g. a Greenpeace volunteer), what that might entail and how, as a 'career' option, it may be driven by ecological/social concerns that challenge dominant economic discourses; life as a full-time 'homemaker' (female *and* male) how/whether 'career' applies.

Utilising alternative 'career' role models that reflect a wider world view and provide scope for critical reflection. Women in the developing world; 'lone-parents' and how they (might) construct versions of 'career'; Ghandi and Mother Theresa who's 'lifecareers' were dedicated to socio-political change and 'public service'; Keisha Castle-Hughes as a Maori teenage mother (*and* successful actress); Steve Irwin, business owner & environmental activist; Georgina Byer, as a transsexual in the workplace.

Exploring career as an economic, political and social construct. Examining 'what' is valued in relation to contemporary career(s), and why; who is included/excluded in current career discourses; what might 'holistic' careers encompass/look like, using imagined scenarios.

Building closer relationships with activities in the wider curriculum. There would appear to be many opportunities to link together learning aims and outcomes in both the academic curriculum, particularly those with a social focus, and other areas such as work experience and 'career development'. For example, making overlaps explicit and complementary, and through critical projects/learning diaries.

Building 'career' time maps or genograms – (see Malott & Magnusson, 2004): these can be developed to enable students to explore the histories of a family, school, community, or social/cultural group to gain an insight into the changing nature of times, and reflect on how the concept of career, and career choices, might have been mediated.

Concluding thoughts

If career education is to be (re)positioned as a socially just practice a radical re-think about its function and purpose will be required. By critically reviewing our policies, programmes and practices, locating these within a critical social justice framework, and broadening our understanding of career, we will be in a position to prepare our students to actively manage their lives in changing and unstable times. Positioning career within a holistic and inclusive educational curriculum will provide scope for career educators to develop programmes that engage with communities, and accommodates diverse cultural needs and desires. Further, by providing students with opportunities to gain a critical understanding of how social, economic and political discourses inform and impact on 'career(s)' it will raise awareness of how they might contribute to the shaping of their individual and collective world(s) as active citizens.

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