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Educational research that has an impact: 'Be realistic, demand the impossible'

2016 Australian Association for Research in Education Presidential Address

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Abstract
This AARE Presidential Address examines what it means to be an educational researcher in the current Australian, and global, political climate. The presentation draws heavily on the work of Levitas (Utopia as Method 2013). The address, using her notions of Utopia as archaeology, as ontology and as architecture, suggests that in the process of promoting a more socially just agenda there is no alternative but to look for alternative ways of doing educational research and being an educational researcher. It concludes by suggesting that associations such as AARE provide opportunities to envisage what academic life could look like for educational researchers in a 'Realistic Utopia'—one in which they are realistic and demand the impossible.

Prologue

What follows is a written speech that was delivered at the AARE Conference at the MCG in December 2016. I have spent a long time sitting on this as I was unsure of whether or not to rewrite it as a formal academic paper. As a Presidential address it does not follow many of the conventions of an academic paper—hence my reluctance to publish as is. However, on reflection, and in consultation with trusted colleagues, I have decided to submit to AER with a few tweaks, some added references and removal of remarks that would have only made sense on the day. The

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respects to their Elders both past and present, and future. I would also like to pay my respects to other Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

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latter includes many of the thank yous that I made to people in the audience. You know who you are.

Introduction

From the moment I became President I have been nervous of this moment. However, I want to say now, before I begin, what an honour it has been to be AARE President, to work with different executives, to come to know the Australian education research community in a way that I had not previously done. When I attended my first AARE conference in Brisbane in 1996 as a PhD candidate, I had no sense of how important this Association would become to me. It has become central to my understandings of myself as an educational researcher in Australia. I will come back to the high regard in which I hold this Association at the end.

In trying to prepare for this presentation, I have been through many previous presidential addresses, and here the work of Lingard and Gale (2010) in particular has been very useful in putting this address together. I have also read their presidential addresses (Gale 2006, Lingard 2001) and others—such as those of Jill Blackmore (2003) and Julianne Moss (2016). I note that they cover a range of topics, some are very much grounded in their own research, some provide challenges for the association, and some help to map the field of educational research. However, as Trevor and Bob indicate they all seek to perform a pedagogical function. Many too are overtly political. I hope that mine too can be pedagogical, political and provoking.

When I was putting some of this presentation together, whilst in Dingle Ireland after the ECER conference in Dublin in September, I commented via e-mail to Peter Renshaw about the wild Atlantic seas I could see out of my window. He replied by suggesting I call the speech 'Rough seas of contemporary education'. He then went on to say 'it's all been said before Martin!'. At that stage I thought I had better read his address in detail. In that presidential, he describes his experience as a young scholar at Murdoch, with a list of who's who in the Australian education research community, many of whom have now retired. He wonders what contributed to the success of these scholars. Whilst trying not to be too romantic, he suggested in his 2001 address that:

> The point of my reminiscence … is to suggest that what was crucial about Murdoch then was not primarily individual ability or insight conceived as personal possessions, as inherent to us as individuals, but the collective opportunities we constructed to learn from each other and to benefit from the diversity of experiences and perspectives that each person brought to educational issues. It was those networks, and the openness of the channels of communication within our interaction that was crucial to our professional learning. Engagement, diversity and openness seem crucial to forming a productive learning community. (Renshaw 2002, pp. 4–5)

Engagement, diversity and openness epitomise the kind of academic life that I think is productive and intellectually and emotionally rewarding. It is not something

that I think is widespread in many of our current university contexts—in some ways it represents a form of utopian dream for many of us. However, I do think that research associations such as AARE can help to create such learning communities, which in turn give some hope that an academic life like the one we often imagine can be realised. As to Peter's comment about 'it all being said before', I do hope I manage to say one or two new things. However, Peter did add that I would be able to deliver it in my unique way. I was not sure what that meant, but on reflection, I can begin in a way that I think no other president has begun the presidential to my knowledge.

So here goes, delivering a presidential address: The first time I was arrested, it was actually for 'delivering an address'. I am not sure what my address was on, perhaps Queensland's civil liberties, perhaps uranium mining, perhaps the cold war, perhaps land rights, perhaps ironically it was about the right to give an address—one perhaps needs to have some knowledge of Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s to understand that moment and to know that 'delivering an address in public' was an offence. These some 35 years later, where I have swapped my blue milk crate for a lectern at the MCG members' lounge, I would like to carry on in that same style and with some of the same substance, arguing for a more socially just world and one in which society's institutions, especially education, need to play a greater role in achieving that society than they do currently.

In my protest days, in amongst my badges, most lost now, I had one that was sometimes attributed to Che Guevara, other times to various counter culture movements in Europe and the US, 'Be realistic: demand the impossible'. I was reminded of this when I was reading Levitas's work on *Utopia as Method* (2013) which references this call to action. I have thus used it as my subtitle, as in a world where some of us concerned with social justice feel very alienated from many aspects of the societies within which we find ourselves, demanding what we see as the impossible seems to me to be essential. And within that, so is the need, I think, to start thinking differently about schooling and education.

As a consequence of trying to think differently about schooling, I have been exploring the notion of 'utopia' (again). Utopian studies have been making a comeback, if they ever went away, in the last few years (see for example, Wright 2010; Moss 2014; Levitas 2013). Much of what I was finding and reading aligned with my own current thinking and reading. The philosopher Nancy Fraser too, who I have worked with in my research with colleagues in alternative schooling (about whom I will say something in a moment), and also with Amanda Keddie, Peter Renshaw and Sue Monk in our recent book *The Politics of Differentiation in Schools* (Mills et al. 2016), has called for an 'institutional imagination in the spirit of realistic utopianism' (Fraser 2009, p. 44).

Central to my current thinking has been Levitas's (2013) *Utopia as Method* and Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), both of which I will say more about later. In education, concepts of utopia have been evident in the work of Fielding and Moss (2011), and Moss's recent work on early childhood (2014), along with Halpin's *Hope and Education* (2003) and has been, even if my co-authors might not agree or want to use the term, important to some of my recent work on alternative

schooling with Glenda McGregor, Kitty te Riele, Deb Hayes and Aspa Baroutsis (see, for example, Mills and McGregor 2014; McGregor et al. 2017).

I understand that notions of 'utopia' can leave many cold. The very term conjures up visions of impossible realities and naive understandings of 'human nature'. It also can be employed in the most reactionary of ways. For example, visions of particular utopias can drive terrorism; capitalism has an underpinning utopia which constructs a world where the market dominates and similarly many Marxists, in my view, have a vision of the ideal society, where the end of 'arriving' justifies the means, no matter how oppressive. It is then perhaps no surprise that philosophers such as Hannah Arendt have been highly suspicious of utopia—as Levitas suggests.

However, I do think that 'utopia' can be thought about differently if such visions, or 'real utopias' as Wright (2010) refers to them, are not regarded as blueprints that hold 'true' in a range of locations and times, but instead, as Wright (2010) argues, can be seen as ways in which to work out 'the core, organizing principles of alternatives to existing institutions, the principles that would guide the pragmatic trial-and-error task of institution building' (p. 7). In exploring some of my concerns I will draw heavily on utopian ideas, especially *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, where Levitas (2013) argues that there are three components of employing utopia as method: utopia as archaeology; as ontology and architecture.

Utopia as archaeology

For Levitas, 'utopia as archaeology' refers to 'piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies' (2013, p. 153).

It is what many of us are very good at: critique. One only needs to look at the programme of this conference to see how we critique PISA and NAPLAN, the ways in which schools perpetuate highly gendered ways of being, issues of social injustice and inequities and so on. To demonstrate this aspect of the method, Levitas employs a sociological analysis to demonstrate the taken for granted assumptions about the 'good society' that underpin current policy frameworks. These include meritocracy, civil society, and economic growth. She argues, for instance, that a utopian meritocratic society underpins the various policy frameworks which advance equality of opportunity. Within the 'utopia' of a meritocratic society people would get their 'just deserts'. This meritocratic utopia, she argues, does not problematize capitalism, it just works out ways for it to operate more effectively by not wasting 'talent'.

This meritocratic utopia of course underpins much of the current system of schooling—in terms of who gets what benefits from the education process. Critiquing 'meritocracy' within schooling has occupied vast amounts of academic work that has provided analyses of class, gender, race, ethnicity and other forms of group subordination. However, it still pervades classroom talk and is present in many of the interviews that I have done with teachers and principals in schools. We also see this meritocratic utopia at play in our universities where 'merit' is rewarded with academic promotions, time away from teaching—one of the great ironies in schools and faculties of education can be the desire not to teach—via fellowships and the

like and rewarded with administrative positions. Many of us—and I do not excuse myself from this—are seduced by this myth of the meritocratic university.

Another form of utopia that pervades policy, including education policy, is a society, and all its social organisations, that can be 'governed by numbers' (Rose 1991). In education we see it in testing, in determining the quality of schooling in attempts to quantify academic work, in measuring the quality of teaching in universities—for example, the UK's *Teaching Excellence Framework*—in universities' own course and lecturer evaluations and in measuring the quality of research through processes such as the Excellence in Research Assessment in Australia and the Research Excellence Framework in the UK. Again, much has been written on the ways in which numbers have had, as Lingard and Sellar (2013) have indicated, 'perverse effects' on systems of schoolings. The work of Hardy (2015), Thompson (2013) and Mockler (2016) also spring to mind here. The effects of these various 'utopias'—maybe dystopias—have included impacts on the ways that teachers and students have come to see and construct themselves, which brings us to Levitas' notion of utopia as ontology.

Utopia as ontology

Levitas has argued 'any discussion of the good society must contain, at least implicitly, a claim for a way of being that is posited as better than our current experience. It entails both imagining ourselves otherwise and a judgement about what constitutes human flourishing' (2013, p. 177).

Utopia as ontology is in many ways a bridge between utopia as archaeology and architecture. Here Levitas is concerned with the ways of being human that are currently valorised and with how we might be otherwise. Within our current ways of organising schooling, we valorise those who are competitive, in particular those who can succeed within the competitive market place that operates in schools and universities. It is not surprising that much academic work has been done on critiquing this system and demonstrating the ways in which particular groups, for example, Indigenous students or students from high poverty backgrounds, become collateral damage in this system and hence provide solutions as to how these groups might be better served by schooling. However, there are dangers in focussing on improving student outcomes, within our work, mine included, in that we risk losing sight of the types of people who are being produced within this system and of what the broader purposes of schooling, or perhaps more accurately, education, might be.

My interviews with young people in alternative settings provide both an indication of how they are made to feel within current schooling structures and of how alternative structures change their sense of self. Veronica was a Year 10 high school student who was studying at an alternative education site, a farm on the outskirts of a very poor Queensland regional community (this comes from work done with Bob Lingard, Marie Brennan, Peter Renshaw, Lew Zipin, Sam Sellar, Richard Waters and Aspa Baroutsis; see Mills et al. 2018). Veronica says:

> The reason I got kicked out is because Mr X, the (deputy) principal there, he actually called me a slut. When I went to tell the higher authorities—I went to the main principal—she didn't believe me. She didn't even know me; she didn't know about my history, but she would not believe me. She said that he would never say that and I swore black and blue that he did to her.
>
> I got very mad at the fact that no-one believed me, so I tried to set his office on fire, but he had a fire extinguisher in there so it didn't get very far. And then I got in trouble by the police then and was sent out here.

Here we see a young woman who is expected to not question, to not challenge authority; who has apparently been sexualised and denigrated by a senior male figure in the school and who has reacted to what she perceives as an injustice and in a way that demonstrates the level of outrage she feels. However, schools when they are constructed differently; when they reject deficit constructions of young people and their communities; when they are concerned with *all* of their students; when they are interested in working *with* young people to make their school lives a positive experience, then they can impact on how these young people come to see themselves and their place in the world far more positively. They can also work to change how teachers see themselves. In an English alternative school that Glenda McGregor and I visited one teacher stated that:

> I taught for a year in a traditional school … But I just found it very difficult being in constant opposition to the kids. I didn't want to be in constant opposition … I wanted to work with them. We were told 'don't smile' until Christmas (laughs)! You know—'if you show a sign of weakness they will defeat you' and that's the way the system is and that's the way it works. And it was everything that I was opposed to and I didn't like it and I couldn't do it… (Mills and McGregor 2014)

This teacher left the school after finding he was starting to shout at kids and did not like who he had started to become.

However, it is not only young people and teachers who can be changed by new structures, by new forms of social organisation, by new forms of pedagogical relationships. I think here of another alternative school setting that I have visited many times with Glenda McGregor and of which I have become quite fond. The school is located in the centre of a regional town and has the support of a local high school, the local council, Rotary Club and the like and has a community outreach programme that sets up situations whereby elder members of the community come and hold regular one on one conversations with the students about their lives, challenges and opportunities. These can be life changing for both the students and for the older people. A conversation we had with a retired magistrate was instructive here:

> I walked up the front stairs and I saw - in those days, there was a couple of boys that were in raggedy clothes, the dirty, smelly hair. One of them had bits of steel/metal hanging all out of his face. I was thinking to myself, "Why the hell - what am I doing here?" It was only a couple of years [since] I was sentencing kids like that. And then I come in and - it took a session, probably an

> hour of talking to these kids and then I started to realise, "Hey, wait a minute, I have pre-judged these kids". I have been pre-judging them wrongly, of course.
>
> So now, I have totally changed the way I think. As I tell the people when they ask me to talk at various places, "it's really education, not legislation that will fix the problem with the youth". I don't mean formal education; I mean education in all sorts of things. (Retired magistrate, mentor Woodlands Flexi School)

'Education in all sort of things'. Here we come perhaps to a conversation about the purposes of education. There are aspects of the world that make me think we need to change who we are—that we need to think about different ways of being. These include, but are clearly not limited to issues around racism, gendered violence, environmental vandalism and refugees.

The former Australian Human Rights Commission President Gillian Triggs in the Derek Fielding Memorial Lecture at Brisbane's Supreme Court was reported on the ABC website (Kim 2016) as saying that 'human rights concerns in Australia had reached "unprecedented" levels in the past few years'. She went on to state that "Australia has become, in my view, isolated and exceptional in its approach to the protection of human rights", that Australians should be "alert and alarmed" about the erosion of their rights; that it was a sad state of affairs given Australia was historically a global champion of human rights, she marked 2001 as a turning point: "Then something went terribly wrong", … "With the start of the new millennium, Australia faltered—we've been in retreat".

I would like to think that schools and educational research can play a role in limiting that retreat and perhaps turning the tide completely. However, I think our obsession with outcomes and measurement, PISA, NAPLAN and the like, has come at the expense of a recognition that education, and educational research, can and should attempt to improve the society and the various communities, global and local, of which we are a part. So providing critique without positing alternatives is problematic.

I have always liked the letter reproduced in the 2005 introduction to Lisa Delpit's book *Other People's Children*, which a principal gives to their staff on the first day of each new school year:

> Dear Teacher,
> I am the survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness:
> Gas chambers built by learned engineers.
> Children poisoned by educated physicians.
> Infants killed by trained nurses.
> Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.
> So I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they were to make our children more humane. (Delpit 2006, p. xix)

As Delpit has argued, having good engineers and doctors is important, but, this is not enough, not nearly enough. I think it is necessary for us think about new ways of doing schooling and education. However, I worry that the message in this letter is one that is trivialised by many in the policy arena, and that the concerns of the marginalised and oppressed, as in this holocaust survivor, are not being addressed in Australia. I think we have become a nation, and we are clearly not alone, that has lost its heart, its compassion. Many Indigenous people would of course argue, with justification, that Australia as a nation has never had one. Australia, is of course not alone here. Many other nations are also shaped by the same oppressive, racist, protectionist, misogynist and homophobic discourses as our own society.

However, in my view so bad is the state of the world, and of education systems that contribute to these harms, that as Fielding (2013) has suggested we have no alternative but to look for alternatives. Thus we come to notions of Utopia as architecture.

Utopia as architecture

Levitas (2013), p. 139 has argued that 'Imagining alternatives helps to counter conformity by contradicting the taken for granted character of the real'. However, this is not always easy to do. Becky Francis and I found this out, when we both expressed some concerns about the ways in which many of us had become very adept at critique but were less adept at providing some visions of what needed to be done to create a more socially just education system. We edited a special issue of the *Journal of Education Policy* on the topic, asking *what would a socially just education system look like?* (Francis and Mills 2012). A number of very high-profile international academics had great difficulty imagining such a scenario, and indeed did not make it into the issue, because they argued the situation was so bad that it was very difficult to envisage a positive future for education.

I understand that position, however, for me it is difficult to forget the words of the infamous British Prime Minister who declared that 'there is no alternative'—which came to be known by its acronym (TINA)—in this case she was referring to global capitalism, to neoliberal ideologies, most especially market competition—and to the erosion of 'society' and the valorization of the 'individual'. I want to resist, what Fielding and Moss (2011) refer to as 'the dictatorship of no alternative', or tyranny—which seems a little less structural to me—of no alternative. I want to be able to imagine new alternatives, new ways of thinking and acting, new ways of living and new ways of educating young people—and this brings me to 'utopia', and the steadfast rejection of TINA.

I have been to schools that trouble existing grammars of schooling and provide opportunities to think about doing school differently. These include schools where, for example, students and staff make all, and I mean all, decisions at a school meeting—these have included the employment of teachers, disciplinary actions, teacher salaries, curriculum choices, school rules and so on. As a student at this rural English school told us:

> …basically the school meeting has the final definitive say on anything in the school that goes on so; expulsions, monetary matters, anything at all can be bought up in the school meeting and overruled by everyone; the student body, the teacher body, all together… one vote, exactly the same, there's not a veto by a head teacher or anything, no, because at Summerhill they have a veto which we don't have. (Mills and McGregor 2014)

I have seen schools take those students that no other school has wanted, or have ensured that students who in the past faced massive barriers to attending school are able to attend their school. Some of these schools have no suspension or exclusion policies—beginning every day as a new day. They have set in motion a range of support structures that meet, for example, students' legal, housing and emotional needs through, for example, crèches, transport to and from school, attending Centrelink or court with students.

I am aware of the critiques of some of these schools. In the first instance, it can be argued that they are small. In the case of the 'democratic schools' it can be argued that they are exclusionary because they cater to middle class students, and that the young people who come to them have been brought up by parents who are committed to ideals of 'democratic parenting'. In most cases this is true. In relation to the second set of schools they can be accused of providing a way in which 'mainstream schools'—for want of a better term—can remove those students who are perceived as being 'damaging' to the school's reputation or good order. However, in both types of school there are some in my view that do offer a new way of engaging those who have been disenfranchised by the system. As such, as Michael Fielding has noted, they offer up new ways of being. As he states:

> When we actually encounter radical alternatives it is in large part their brute reality, their enacted denial of injustice and inhumanity and their capacity to live out a more fulfilling, more generous view of human flourishing that in turn moves us to think and act differently. (Fielding 2013), p. 125

What does this have to do with educational research?

I want to turn now, and try and apply some of the utopia as method tools to consideration of educational research and impact and engagement, asking 'how can educational research engage in Levitas's 'imaginary reconstitution of society'?'.

Archaeology

In terms of utopia as archaeology we need, I think, to look at academic life today and how the 'utopias' implicit within the dominant discourses shaping our worlds inhibit or enhance our engagement with that task.

There is much to be concerned with in relation to various practices within the higher education sector, for example—without putting too fine a point on it—the austerity measures that exist in our places of work that continue to make us try to

do more with less. As educational researchers, we are concerned about the ways in which our research is often denigrated as 'second class' by media commentators, and sometimes by some of our own. We are concerned when educational research is farmed out to accounting firms and think tanks (I would draw your attention to a recent special issue of the *Australian Educational Researcher* on think tanks). There are concerns with the ways in which audit cultures are shaping our everyday work, as everything is increasingly measured and counted (or in some cases not counted). This has been clearly the case with the Excellence in Research Assessment and the soon to be Impact and Engagement agenda, which we do indeed need to critique where appropriate.

Whilst I do not think we should shy away from wanting to have an impact, or from engaging with the communities with which we undertake our research, or with each other nationally and internationally, the problem lies in how impact and engagement will be measured and determined—and how that affects how we come to see ourselves as researchers.

Ontology

In relation to utopia as ontology, the ways in which the ideal self is demonstrated in the current environment is perhaps best described as 'terrified', as Ball has done in relation to those working in English schools, where he employed the notion of the 'terrors of performativity' (2003). Academics are terrified of being seen as irrelevant, as not performing by way of publications and grant income, or of becoming something we do not want to be by engaging in competitive comparisons with our colleagues—I have seen promotion applications where candidates have done metric searches on other staff members or academics in other universities—in order to justify their promotions. It has been said to me—I don't know if it is true or not—in relation to ARC assessments—'you're tough on each other'. Is this part of the competitive regime we have taken up? The 'it only matters if it is measured' discourse impacts upon how we go about our daily work lives. It can affect willingness to support colleagues, to engage in external work—any journal editor knows how hard it is to find reviewers, for example. However, perhaps the new engagement agenda, which hopefully will reward collaborations, can be used to help us to become something else.

Architecture

This brings me to architecture. Throughout the course of this presidency and as a result of becoming a new Head of School, I have been thinking about the question of 'what kind of education community would I like to work in?'.

If we as researchers were to consider what the ideal, the utopian vision, would be for the education academic community, I am sure that 'impact' would figure. Recognising that 'education' is worthy of studying in its own right; we as educational researchers do want to make a difference to the educational experiences of children,

young people and adults and specific populations within those groups. We want to see teachers provided with workplaces that support their wellbeing and their pedagogical activities, we want to see universities that care about their employees and the work undertaken by those employees, and so on. However, as Furlong has indicated, 'the apparent lack of impact…is a major flaw in the defence of the discipline; a flaw that urgently needs to be addressed' (2013, p. 190). We do indeed need to make our work more visible—and influential.

However, and as I indicated above, as Francis (2011, pp. 4–5) has stated, whilst impact is important: 'there is a moral imperative for academics to engage the impact agenda beyond the narrow drivers of research assessment measurements'. Referencing Delamont (2010) she argues for academics to 'focus on what we consider to be *our own* impact priorities' (p. 6). Along such lines, John Furlong has stated:

> If education as a field of study is (to be) fully integrated into the university system, like the university system as a whole, it urgently needs to find a voice; it needs to set out a (utopian) vision for itself; it needs to state what its purpose or purposes should be in the modern world. (Furlong 2013, p. 5)

I do not want to make this an advertisement for AARE, but I do think that educational research organisations, like AARE—BERA, AERA, NZARE, WERA, ATEA and so on, can be central to creating that vision by demonstrating alternative ways of being. As such I want to highlight some of those aspects of this community that suggest utopian possibilities, keeping in mind Levitas's view that 'all utopias are flawed' (2013, p. 215). This is not an extensive list, but an indication of how some of our core activities have developed over the years.

AARE: Utopian possibilities

Our Community AARE is not the executive, any particular office bearer, or the conference, but us the people in this room, and of course some who could not be with us. We can make it what we want it to be. AARE can be our realistic utopian space where academics work on common purposes; where there is a counterpoint to current trends in universities, what Lynch (2010) and her colleagues have referred to as the 'the careless university'. In my view, we need to take care of this community and use it as a space where we grow, develop and build alternatives to the ways in which many of our institutions construct the nature of academic life. This can happen through involvement in SIGs, through engaging with and initiating strategic initiatives, seeking roles on the executive, contributing the AARE blog and associated discussions, encouraging attendance at its events and so on.

The conference I think the field of educational research has to engage with the big questions of 'what kind of society do we want to live in?' and 'how can our research contribute to such a vision?'. I think the vast majority of research presented at this conference—from small localised to large international projects—has much to contribute to these debates. I think we should embrace the notion of making sure that our work presented here has an impact, and that we as a community work to support each

other in that endeavour. I also think that there are ways in which the conference can be shaped to create a forum through which we can come together to work on matters that are not addressed in our own institutions. The early career conference that precedes the annual conference is one such forum. Over the years it has taken various shapes, but has always been owned and run by early career researchers.

Our network University-based members of AARE have been working closely with senior policy officers, many of whom are in this room and are also members of AARE, to ensure that policy and research are not seen as distant cousins. We have been seeking to develop ways in which we might come to understand each other's priorities better so that we can benefit the lives of young people. Our ongoing engagement with the Research Education Network (REN), consisting of senior education research policy officer across Australian jurisdictions, is evidence of this.

As an organisation we have been engaging beyond our borders, we have been trying to internationalise our engagement with like-minded organisations, we have members of many other national associations attending this conference and I would like to extend a warm and belated welcome to Professor Gary McCulloch, the incoming president of BERA to the conference. Many of the issues we face here in Australia are similar to those faced by education research communities internationally.

We have lobbied on behalf of us all in relation to many government initiatives. For example, with the ARC's impact and engagement agenda, we have outlined concerns and made suggestions for further refinements of the assessment exercise. Much of this work has been done by academics who are not part of the executive but committed to the education research community. As I indicate below, one of the most impressive attributes of our community is the way in which people give of their own time, usually with little recognition in their workplaces, to enhance the quality and recognition of educational research in Australia.

Theory workshops The AARE Theory Workshops seek to provide what for many academics has become a luxury—time to read, to think and engage in deep conversation over a lengthy period of time. I was recently talking with a former early career colleague who had worked at a university where someone had made a sarcastic comment to him because he was reading a book in his office—as if he had time for such an indulgence! The ever demanding nature of our work does mean that stopping to read can be pushed aside—engaging with discussions about theory and methodology can be extremely difficult. (I would guess that the vast majority of my colleagues eat at their desks or computers.) AARE workshops, that are distributed around the country, often in regional areas, provide a space where one of the reasons why many of us came into academia—to engage in intellectual discussion—can take place. What is more the presenters and those organising these workshops—give up their time with no rewards—and certainly no workload points from their home institutions—to support this endeavour. Deans and Heads of School across the country have also supported these workshops through the provision of space, catering and the like.

Strategic initiatives and Awards AARE recognises that funding for important events and projects dear to the hearts of members can be difficult to come by. Hence, we have a programme of strategic initiatives that enable our members—and each must contain an ECR—to help set educational agendas across the country. We seek to foreground new and exciting and groundbreaking work, through our awards—and many people give their time, and willingly, to be on committees like the Doctoral Award Committee to support the selection of these awards. These strategic initiatives have led to book proposals, special issues of journals and productive collaborations—often with international partners.

Conclusion

Taken together, these five elements of AARE, may seem minor and may seem to have little to do with utopian notions of academic life. However, realistic utopian spaces, as indicated by Wright, are not finished projects, they are projects underway. It is with this recognition that I also want to say something about Indigenous engagement. Lingard and Gale (2010, p. 8) noted 'the deafening silence about concerns about Indigenous education across the 40 years' of the association's existence'. I hope that this is changing.

AARE has many Indigenous colleagues amongst our membership, and very senior people such as Tracey Bunda and Kevin Lowe, and emerging leaders such as Melitta Hogarth, all of whom have recently served on the Executive, are integral to our organisation. The Executive has pursued an agenda that has tried to make the educational research community an inclusive one. You will have noticed that we have an Indigenous interpretive tour at this conference and if you were in Fremantle, you will have seen the tour to Rottnest Island: we want ensure that opportunities are provided at each conference site to learn about the culture and histories of the land on which we are meeting. We have designated two positions on the executive for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers. Those positions are determined by the Indigenous academics in our community. We are currently working on a reconciliation statement that recognises the harms done by the educational research community to Indigenous communities and commits to working against damaging practices. I know that many in the AARE community are committed to ensuring that the efforts of the association to address matters of injustice in relation to colonial legacies are ongoing and enhanced.

We know we need to do more as a community in matters of social justice, and I know that Annette Woods, the incoming President, the Executive and our membership, are highly committed to doing so—in relation to refugees, to the hate and discrimination that has been picking up pace in many countries in western Europe, the US and Australia, to consider the needs of staff members of our association who do not have tenure and go from short-term contract to contract. I would like us, as an educational research community, for instance, to take up the call by Jeff Duncan-Andrade, from the Roses in Concrete Community School in the US, for schools not just 'to help an escape from poverty, but to end it' (see http://rosesinconcrete.org).

Engaging in such utopian tasks will not be easy, as Smith (2017), the highly respected Maori academic, when discussing critical Kaupapa Māori theory—stated, don't just write and talk about it, "show me the blisters on your hands". This to me represents a call to have impact. It is a recognition that talking and writing about education policy, theory, pedagogy, curriculum and most importantly social justice is not enough. We have to be concerned with impact. With engagement. With action. With making a difference. With demonstrating the 'blisters on our hands'. At times this might seem overwhelming, but in these uncertain and confronting times, we need to remain 'realistic and to demand the impossible'.

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