REF2021

Institution: York St John University

Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Education

Title of case study: Embracing and Enacting Agonistic Democracy in Teaching and Teacher education

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 - 2020

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s): Matthew Clarke	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Education	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2015 - 2020

Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016 - 2020

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Set against a policy background that increasingly demands conformity and compliance on the part of teachers, Clarke's work seeks to engage education researchers, teacher educators and teachers with an agonistic-democratic conception of education. This conception recognizes the value of plurality, contestation and a tragic worldview, resisting simplistic notions of individual and societal redemption and emancipation through education. It enables teacher educators, teachers and schools to analyse and change their practice in critical, agentive ways. The work has been utilized by experienced teachers, teacher educators and pre-service teachers in the UK, USA and Australia to critically analyse aspects of education policy and practice and enhance teachers' professional agency.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Context of the Research: Teachers today are under considerable pressure from national and local policy makers to produce measurable results. This has diminished their collective and individual capacity for exercising critical professional judgement. Clarke's work is characterized by an emphasis on foregrounding the political and ideological situatedness of education policy and practice and represents a sustained project to resist the diminishment of teachers' and teacher educators' professional agency and autonomy.

Clarke, 2009 **[3.1]** (248 Google Scholar citations) focused on the ways in which teachers and teacher educators might draw on a Foucauldian historicism to mobilise the notion of teacher identity in order to actively and critically reflect on, rather than passively accept, a) the parts of the self that are deemed relevant and pertinent to teaching; b) the sources of authority accepted in thinking about teaching; c) the practices engaged in for the purposes of developing as a teacher; and d) the assumed endpoint or goal of teaching and being a teacher. The paper suggests that such an approach offers scope for enhanced agency in relation to teachers' practice and development.

The political nature of education policy and practice was revisited in Clarke, 2012 **[3.2]** (160 Google Scholar citations), which highlighted the de-politicising effects of dominant managerial and technocratic discourses in education and the associated uncritical acceptance and normalisation of pervasive, yet ultimately empty, terms like 'quality' and 'effectiveness', which

assume that the purpose of education is improving scores in standardized tests and tables. The paper draws on political and psychoanalytic theories to develop its arguments.

Clarke & Phelan, 2015 **[3.3]** analysed teacher education is in terms of a dialectic between positivity and negativity, whereby the positive refers to social structures, institutions and policies – best practice or teaching standards – that have become reified, while the negative unsettles and disrupts the dominant order. Drawing on the notion of negativity as a creative-destructive force, the paper offered new conceptual resources, such as agonism, dissensus, fantasy and 'impotentiality', for imagining alternative scenarios for teacher education beyond the confines of current policies.

Clarke & Phelan, 2017 **[3.4]** expanded this conceptual framework in a book length analysis, drawing on recent and contemporary social and political theory and examining cases from education policy and practice in England, Canada, Australia and the USA. The book provides teachers and teacher educators with conceptual and theoretical tools in order to achieve a critical distance in relation to dominant policies and develop more agentive, critical and creative teaching practices.

Clarke, 2018 **[3.5]** revisited Dewey's arguments for the mutual dependency of a vibrant democracy and meaningful education system, highlighting the obstacles currently mitigating against their individual and mutual flourishing. It also argued that, despite the current inauspicious context, educators need to retain critical and creative dispositions and to engage with agonistic democratic ideals of pluralism, contestation and (anti-redemptive) tragedy, in order to understand and mediate, rather than eliminate, conflict and disagreement, and to enhance the relationship between democracy and education.

Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke & McManus **[3.6]** analysed the professional development activities of a community of educators in a multi-academy trust in Manchester, arguing that the nature of the educators' development reflected the tenets of agonistic democracy, highlighting the institutional and educational value of a plurality of voices and the contestation of ideas, alongside a recognition on the part of educators that any answers and solutions always raise further questions and issues.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[3.1] Clarke, M. (2009). The ethico-politics of teacher identity. *Educational Philosophy & Theory, 41*(2), 185-200. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2008.00420.x

[3.2] Clarke, M. (2012). The (absent) politics of neo-liberal education policy. *Critical Studies in Education, 53*(3), 297-310. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2012.703139

[3.3] Clarke, M., & Phelan, A. (2015). The power of negative thinking in and for teacher education. *Power and Education, 7*(3), 257-271. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1757743815607025

[3.4] Clarke, M., & Phelan, A. (2017). *Teacher education and the political: The power of negative thinking*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315732671

[3.5] Clarke, M. (2018). Democracy and education: In spite of it all. *Power and Education, 10*(2), 112-124. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1757743818756915

[3.6] Hammersley-Fletcher, L., Clarke, M., & McManus, V. (2018). Agonistic democracy and passionate professional development in teacher-leaders. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 48*(5), 591-606. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2017.1378312

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Clarke's research provides a generative conceptual framework that facilitates teachers', teacher educators' and teacher education students' critical engagement with education policy and practice. As the Executive Head (EH) of a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) commented, Clarke's work, "has impacted the strategy of both the school and the MAT of which the school is a part" **[5.3]**. This impact has been facilitated by Clarke's combination of conceptual sophistication and accessibility. As a US education scholar, who has utilized the work with students since 2016, argues, Clarke's work "bridges an enormous gulf between abstract philosophical work and the more concrete contexts of educational policy and practice" It achieves this by being "remarkably clear and accessible to students who have limited tolerance for 'high theory'" **[5.1]**. Specifically, the work enables teachers to embrace the agonistic virtues of plurality, contestation and tragedy, as evidenced below.

Plurality
Recognition of the benefits of a **plurality** of voices in critical discussions about educational practice is evident in the development of a research-based community of practice in the MAT in Manchester**,** comprising 9 primary and secondary schools. After encountering Clarke's work **[3.1; 3.3; 3.5; 3.6]**, the Trust leadership engaged him as a research mentor and professional development facilitator to co-lead workshops attended by teachers and school leaders. As the EH explains, the MAT sought "to change the role a little bit of that specialist leader (SLE) so that rather than going in and trying to fix writing or spelling they would form groups within the schools and sort of more consultative groups in they would have discussions – agonistic discussions – nobody would be the expert so the SLE wouldn't be viewed as this external person coming in" [these agonistic discussions] "gave the space to come back and offer another perspective or challenge or hear the voice that perhaps wasn't most present in the first conversation but on reflection it was missing or didn't contribute or offered something that perhaps we hadn't heard" **[5.3]**.

Contestation
A second key impact was embracing the value of **contestation** and robust debate in professional discussions about education policy and practice. As the Manchester Trust EH notes, engagement with agonistic democracy "enabled us to use change management theory a little bit in a more philosophical approach actually and understand that contestation is healthy and good as opposed to it being something we don't promote or are worried about" **[5.3]**. The virtues of contestation, framed as 'negative thinking' **[3.3; 3.4]**, shaped the practice of an educator at **Kent State University**, **Ohio, USA**, inspiring her "to develop a new course for graduate students in our Cultural Foundations of Education program based on the concept of negative thinking in education". She describes how Clarke's "insistence on the value of dwelling in the negative gave students a rich and nuanced conceptual vocabulary". Drawing on the critical analyses of dominant policy and practice offered in these outputs, "students in the course brought the analyses offered in the text to bear on a range of topics", illustrating the benefits of providing critical analyses of policy and practice beyond those topics explicitly analysed in the outputs. **[3.2 & 3.3]** have been used with cohorts of 30 first year students each semester in an undergraduate initial teacher education program at the **University of Queensland** (UQ), **Australia**. Against a background that seeks to naturalise existing policies, a UQ lecturer

highlighted the value of **[3.2]** for his students: "the article not only makes use of important theory but also presents a really interesting and useful analysis of policy; first to show that policy can and should be analysed and then to see that work 'in operation'" **[5.2]**. Referring to **[3.3]**, this same lecturer noted how this work enables his Education students to recognise possibilities for contesting dominant policy agendas and envisaging different educational realities beyond the status quo: "this work allows my students to see some of the causes of, and pose alternatives to, the narrowing down, and anxiety producing effects, of current policy and practice in education" **[5.2]**.

Tragedy

A third key impact, reflecting the third dimension of agonistic democracy, involved embracing a **tragic** worldview that resists quick-fixes or one-size-fits-all solutions and accepts the persistence of issues and challenges. As the **Manchester** EH notes in relation to her MAT's efforts to embed democratic principles into their professional practice at all levels, "I think having experienced the other side of it – the traditional DfE SLE role which is go in and fix it and make it better in six weeks – we had seen the damage that that does… and how that is a sticking plaster approach and how that doesn't support school to embed change or to even understand change – it's such a complex process let alone the expectation of a six week quick fix window" **[5.3]**. As Clarke's work has argued, such tolerance for experimentation and for slower timelines are crucial if democracy, rather than just technocratic efficiency, is to become central to educational practice.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Testimonial: Associate Professor, Kent State University, USA

[5.2] Testimonial: Senior Lecturer, University of Queensland, Australia

[5.3] Testimonial: Executive Head, The Gatley School Alliance, Manchester, UK