

TT Series 3

Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith

Transcript October 2024

Jane Hunter:

Susan Groundwater-Smith AM is one of Australia's greatest academic practitioners who has remained close to practitioners in schools. She has over 50 years of teaching and academic experience in both mainstream and special education. She's the author of many, many scholarly books and peer reviewed journal articles. Plus, she has published resources, commentary and paper papers. Susan has a particular literary obsession, and in her writing about schools, teachers and young people, she possesses conceptual and philosophical arguments, but always strongly grounded in the world of practice itself. Susan is Honorary Professor at the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. She's a life member of the Australian Association for Research in Education. The Practical Experience in Professional Education Incorporated, and she has received a lifetime achievement award from the University of Sydney. Her most recent book is an edited book *Learning from Essays on Hope, Wisdom and Courage in Today's Schools and Beyond*. Welcome, Susan.

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

Thank was a very approving introduction. Of course I liked it.

Don Carter:

So great to have you here. And I want to start off by talking about this new book of yours, which you've edited *Essays on Hope Wisdom Encouraging Today's Schools*. I'll start by referring to your Herald Wyndham Memorial address to the New South Wales Institute of Educational Research in 2022. You start off with an extract from Emily Dickinson's fragile and delicate poem on Hope, which you also including the introduction to the book of Essays.

'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.'

Now you say in your book it's a salutary reminder in an era where policies and practices in education are under unseen assault, that we should see hope as an existential force that can enable these challenges to be faced with vitality and energy.

Can you tell us about hope, wisdom and courage right now in education?

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

I can tell you about all of those things.

But before turning to the substance of your question, I'd like to take up the matter of why essays. I know you have an interest in it in the way that is rendered because it's a departure from the academic form that's normally found in books and chapters and journal articles. Essays are a different genre. They apply, employ language, nuance, ambiguity and uncertainty. They engage the writer and reader alike. The opening essay in the book opens up the discussion about the essay form

itself, and it's quite an important introduction for people to read before they pursue the remainder of the essays, because they might find them somewhat unexpected in an academic publication. But you quote, 'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul,' that it is a phenomenon that's existential. It's in the here and now. It's in education. And it relates to what several writers refer to as praxis that's being committed to the moral centre of human interaction, of good. We seem to have lost some of that impetus to think about education as a means of doing good, not just an instrumental form that takes people into it or for employability. It's being able to do good as members of our society, and it takes wisdom to understand these precepts, and it certainly takes courage, which is why those things go together. And in the opening essay, I address both wisdom and courage beyond hope.

It's also important to see what's in the face of what amounts to the current authoritarianism that's embedded in so many of today's policies. And I think that takes you, Jane, to what you want to say about Gert Biesta's work.

Jane Hunter:

Yes, we're big fans of Gert Biesta and we loved seeing that you were referencing Biesta in a few times. But you talk about his exploration of the future of teaching and teacher education and he regards much of the current onslaught upon teachers, their practices and preparation as efforts to de-professionalise them, as acts of command and control. And this is something that you have written about often, Susan. So do you think that we've actually reached that point of no return for teacher judgement and discernment?

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

Absolutely not.

Absolutely not. We would have to give up on school education altogether and school education and beyond. And I want to make that point about beyond, because there are so many other facilities that assist in the education of young people and in our coalition that I want to talk about later. A number of cultural institutions are deeply committed to education and to concerns about not over-managing that learner, giving the learners some space in which to become active and to have agency, which of course is what Biesta was concerned with when he talked about liberating education and specifically schooling that's currently is necessarily trampled by regulation and control.

And this is reflected in the essays that you read throughout the collection. Whether they're writing about climate change, or reimagining schooling post COVID. That was provocative. It's not one that people will take lightly because it's written by an historian who understands that if you remove what is called the norms, which was what happened during COVID, other kinds of educational practices can arise. And I think, you know, we hear a lot of negative outcomes from COVID, but she is suggesting that there's something else to be looked at. There's also an essay on truth-telling in indigenous education, there's a continual seeding of engagement of teachers and learners in shaping the circumstances of learning. And that's what Biesta wants to see, and that's what I think we can hope to see.

Don Carter:

You will be aware of the focus currently on direct instruction in explicit teaching and evidence-based practices that seem to be ubiquitous at the moment in the media, in directives from departments of education, in resource production. There's also a lot of negative commentary around inquiry-based learning. Now, I know several years ago you wrote a chapter in a popular textbook for teacher education students that focuses on inquiry. I understand you're updating it at the moment. Just on that, what do you plan to emphasize in that update on inquiry based learning.

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

To depart slightly once again? Because I want to first address inquiry-based learning for teachers in my newly updated entry in the Oxford Encyclopedia of Teacher Education, I've argued that too often government policies designed to drive practice taken evidence-based approach that's wholly reliant on the works of agencies, as you said before, think-tanks and so on external to the classroom.

It's to be understood that the term evidence-based practice is a very tricky one.

It's often told by employing authorities both government and independent, with little reference to a full understanding of teachers' work. They don't seem to actually know what goes on in classrooms on a day-to-day basis. That is essential that the practitioners in the field, the teachers, not only are able to investigate their own work and its impact on learning, but also can evaluate that which has been offered as evidence by others.

Let them evaluate the evidence that comes before them. Many so-called improvements and reforms in education are developed with very little reference to what teachers know and understand of their own practice. They are developed for teachers rather than with teachers. And as Jane would know, there were a number of initiatives some years ago that gave teachers a lot of opportunity to work alongside academics and policymakers, in fact, to investigate practice.

Similarly, young people in schools. We need to draw upon their learner's capacity to make decisions and investigate, not merely to be told. Recently, I've been drawn to early childhood education. I must have a little indulgence here with my grandchildren. I see those daily bulletins that come from their early learning centres. It's not just childcare, it's early learning. It's so exciting and I've seen what can be achieved by honouring those learners and their great capacities. They have so much more freedom. They respond to what has happened on the day to the children and they draw on it and they elicit from it and they develop it. It's an exciting thing to actually observe, but we don't see nearly enough of it in schools.

Jane Hunter:

And so, in that chapter Susan, that you're going to be writing, I'm just wondering, what is that main focus of that then, in a sense of what you've just discerned as arguably different.

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

That chapter draws attention, first of all, to what's problematic about what we call evidence and how we evaluate evidence, who collects it from whom it's collected, how it's processed. And it asks teachers, in considering their own inquiry capacities to ask themselves how they might go about collecting evidence by a means that enables them to improve their practice.

I'm sorry, I'm sort of circulating around it a little, but it's quite a long article. It's about 5000 words and draws very extensively on them thinking and considering the circumstances in which schools are evolving and developing. So, it's not only the curriculum we tend to probably focus on mainly on pedagogy and the curriculum, but the actual circumstances of learning, physical circumstances, the ways in which schools are designed, what the design of schools enables to happen or not to happen. You only have to look at the default of classrooms, desks in rows. You only have to look at media representations of classrooms, desks in rows to ask ourselves, why do we get so caught up in particular ways and means of doing things without looking at what happens if we sit under a tree?

Jane Hunter:

You mentioned the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, which was central to a lot of your work over many years, and central to that was student voice. And you were really talking about student voice, writing about student voice decades before it became it, dare I say, a new thing, But I wondered if we could just think about that now in the context of the work that you were doing at places like Granville Boys, for example, but also the institutions that you've worked with, the State Library, for example. So why is student voice so important?

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

I'm going to draw on a chapter I just recently published in a book that's called *A World Worth Living In*, and it argues for students and it says to their own learning. And I take listening to the student voice as enabled as an educative practice in which teachers and learners work together in participative inquiry and think about big issues like inclusion and social justice.

It's into the pedagogical power relations and hierarchical governance that in the typical assemblages of engagement on the part of those participating, and I like to call it the dance of education, but I won't ask you which dance it happens to be. It could be a tango. I remember it. My dissolute youth guy in square dancing. What a terrible confession.

The Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools brought together such a diverse range of schools. It was inclusive of government schools, very well-endowed independent schools. It included cultural institutions. And when you brought those people together in a way that they were able to speak with each other without fear or favour, and one of the great benefits of the Coalition was it was unfunded. It was not accountable to anybody other than those who participated in it. Now, of course, it was a cost to the institutions because they released teachers to come and speak with each other. It brought them into the ambit with the academics as well. But it was able to do it without having to write a report at the end, for example. So it was a very interesting and innovative way of people being able to spend time with each other.

And if I can just take an example from a cultural institution, when we were visiting the State Library and it was an exhibition to do with World War One and some boys from Granville Boys High were walking around looking at the photos and one of the boys said to another in my hearing, 'Isn't it

strange we see an awful lot about the beginning and during the war. We don't hear much about the end of the war.' One of the other boys turned around and said: What do wars really end? And he came from Afghanistan, and we talked about the stuff, and it actually contributed to the way in which they could further annotate their exhibition. So there's learning going on all the time when you hate young people.

Don Carter:

We've come to that part of the interview where you get to do a bit of a rant, 30-second rant. Now it can be on any topic you like, but we would ask that it's 30 seconds. We're going to keep an eye on the time, but over to you.

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

Okay. I've partly covered this when we've had some of our informal discussions - it's the transience of policy and decision making that jumps from one borrowed policy to another with very little reference to the deep and profound issues associated with educational praxis, with its essential moral basis.

There is a fundamental lack of transparency. Progressive practices find it hard to see the light of day. The issues around Lindfield Learning Village is one example. How things change. I will quote from that 1974 publication and I hope this is going to be included in my 30 seconds when Doug Swan, who was director of Primary Education 50 years ago, wrote that:

'Nothing can be more satisfying to an educational administrator than to find that a new syllabus will offer a great deal of freedom to be taken up by large numbers of teachers and make the subject of enthusiastic experiment. Nothing can be more satisfying to an educational administrator than to find such a syllabus.'

That's it.

Jane Hunter:

That was really some rant. And look, we could probably have based the whole podcast around those points that you've raised in that. Thank you so much, Susan.

I want to move now just by way of a closing to the best memories you have about your first year of teaching, because our audience for this podcast include pre-service teachers and in-service teachers, principals and bureaucrats in education. You started teaching at Woollahra Public School, and what would you say to that new teacher, considering what you know now about education and your experience? And perhaps you've got a few messages to teachers who are about to start their teaching careers?

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

Jane, I must take you back a little bit further. In my history, I first taught in Victoria and I taught in a girls' home where those girls were. It was virtually a girls' prison cyclone wire fences around it locked

up for many hours per day. And I learned a tremendous amount about how social class trumps everything. Those girls came from the most difficult circumstances and they, in the time I was there, who happened to be there, who came from a family that could afford to have a solicitor argue her case. And she was there for a couple of days. Most were there for an amount of time that I never had a sense of when it might end.

I came to New South Wales and I taught at Rozelle Junior Boys High School. It was known at the time it was a kindergarten to Year 9 school and it was voted by the University of New South Wales as the neediest school in the state, and it was the most appalling conditions and they raised, had a commitment and raised money for it and some little gain from that.

Going from there to Woollahra to teach an opportunity class in a demonstration school. The differences were remarkable, but each of those appointments taught me a tremendous amount about the lived life of kids in schools and what I would want to say to young people today going to schools is, first of all, maintain the joy.

There's a joy in teaching. It's much more than just doing the work. It's much more than just an occupation. Be prepared for it to be an impossible task. That's one of Jane Ruddock's points that I think was well made.

But the very fact that it's impossible makes it possible. I don't know if that conundrum makes sense, but it does to me and strive for the reality notion of possibility.

And most of all, take care of yourself.

Jane Hunter:

While that was a wonderful and historic record and to hear that you started in that girl's home, gosh, that was something I've known you for a very long time, and I wasn't aware that you had taught in Victoria and then Rozelle. I mean, that's extraordinary and maintaining the joy. These are, you know, still, after all these years, Susan, learning so much. So thank you so much for your interview today and for your time.

Don Carter:

Yes, thank you, Susan. That was really inspiring.

Susan Groundwater-Smith:

Well, thank you for inviting me.

Don Carter:

Well, Jane, as I said, that was an inspirational interview. And what I've seen of Susan's work over the last 30 years is how she makes hope practical with a call to action for the teaching profession itself, as well as those who serve it, by continuing to pose a challenge to the compliance agenda in all its manifestations, not a challenge to be taken lightly, but one, as her colleague Judith Sachs would say, is compelling, intrinsically rewarding and honourable.

Jane Hunter:

It was really timely to have this conversation with Susan and obviously, you know, we touched on a lot of issues I think, that are really in the forefront of many of us that work in education at the moment.

And, you know, using Susan's edited book on Hope and Courage is not only manifest in what she was able to share with us, but also directly links into the experiences of many teachers and principals in Australian schools right now.

And one of the things that I think that we need to be mindful of is, you know, thinking about sort of what compliance means and what do our curriculum directions and forays by government into course content for example. And I think Susan, her work, you know, and bringing in quotes that were made from literature 50 years ago, I guess education does go in those peaks and troughs. But I think what we're seeing now is a real sort of back to basics shift that is ignoring a lot of the richness and the gains and the innovations that we've made in education.

Don Carter:

Quite right. And what always surprises me and disappoints me is the reliance on think tanks institutes, rather than going to educational researchers and scholars for advice.

Jane Hunter:

Yes, Susan and her colleague writing colleagues, Nicole Mockler. They published a book several years ago now, I think it was around 2009 and it really took to task the idea that schools and young people learning and teachers, teachers work, principal leadership is necessarily a political project. And but within that being a political project, there must be a strong voice of the profession and thinking about the importance of teacher judgement because so much has been lost. And I think Susan really makes that point in several ways. And she also draws in her early experiences in extraordinary locations, but prescient currently.

Don Carter:

And I really liked her point when she talked about resources that were developed for teachers instead of resources developed with teachers, and there should be more work with teachers.

Jane Hunter:

Thanks so much, Don. Really great conversation.