

Remaking Teaching: Ideology, Policy and Practice

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If we measure our society according to how we care for our children, then clearly we are failing . . . [A] series of research reports shows that class sizes are growing, many schools feel they need to raise their own funds to buy basic equipment, and too many teachers are stressed by the pace of change and over-burdened by administrative tasks

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Introduction

The bold educational policy experiment embarked upon around the world over the past decade of redrawing the boundaries around teaching through educational reform and restructuring, is in deep and possibly terminal trouble. Teachers are reeling from the effects of poorly conceptualised reform policies that have literally torn the heart out of their work (Smyth, 1995a; Dow, 1996; Shacklock, 1995). We have gone considerably beyond the point of waving an accusing finger at an occupational group who are allegedly unable to cope with change. The focus needs to be put instead squarely on the policies ushered into public schools, and ask whether these have really worked, and whether the professional, social and personal costs have been too high.

The most salient point we can make at the outset is that the exclusion of teachers from participating in the changes to their work has not only been extremely disappointing, but will likely have devastating long term consequences for the future of schools. By excluding teachers as active agents in shaping their own identities and those of their schools, we have wasted a valuable opportunity. There are several reasons for this (Smyth, 1995b): (i) the alternative to acknowledging and drawing upon the extensive accumulated knowledge and expertise of teachers, is that outsiders presume to know "what is wrong with schools", and proceed to devise inappropriate prescriptions on "how to fix the situation"; (ii) teachers' work becomes devalued, and we get locked into an unfortunate spiral of low morale, declining commitment, under-valued status, teacher burnout, media hype about failing schools-- and the whole process impacts upon itself; (iii) we need to work instead at creating the public spaces where discussion about the purposes of schooling and its valued social ends can be discussed, and where there is some democratic process for sorting out whose views prevail and whose get excluded, as discussions about

teaching widens to include the relationship between schools and society. This is not by and large the case, as the instance we canvass indicates.

The research we shall draw upon in this paper is the result of an intense 4 year study involving 250 teachers and principals from 1993-1996 of the effects of one particular educational policy initiative on teachers' work -- and one that gave all of the outward appearances at the beginning of not only being benign but even supportive of teachers. But, as the evidence showed, policies do not always turn out as they are supposed to. We believe it is possible to extrapolate to other similar policies elsewhere.

In many respects the credentials of this policy initiative were impeccable. The initiative was known throughout Australia as the Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) category. Developed as a consequence of extensive consultation between peak teacher union bodies, the state and federal governments, and independent school systems, this policy initiative was to be the means by which teachers were to finally have their teaching recognised and appropriately rewarded. It was to be the way of keeping good teachers in the classroom, as distinct from having them advance into administrative positions.

It would not be inaccurate to say that at the time of this study and the period that has transpired since, that teachers in Australia and elsewhere, have been on the receiving end of increasingly unfavourable press from parents and the media. They are often blamed, without evidence, either directly or by implication, for being a major source of the problem of sagging international economic competitiveness and low productivity performance. The tenor of public discussion invariably tends to be in deficit terms -- standards are falling, illiteracy is rising, teachers are less than competent, devolution of management will make teachers more responsible to parents, there needs to be increased testing as a proxy for teacher effectiveness, and schools need to be made more competitive by parental choice and the publication of league tables of school results. The most recent twist in Australia, would have massive amounts of resources bled off from the public school system to private schools as an alleged means of promoting choice, and therefore, efficiency. In other words, teachers have been treated in "low trust" ways (Sullivan, 1994) -- they have been increasingly coerced, made more accountable, subjected to regimes of competition, and generally made to do their economic work.

It is not surprising that against this kind of background (and it has intensified in the 1990s), teachers were (and are) looking for professional and public affirmation of their teaching. There was a widespread feeling among teachers that their work was undervalued, and even more misunderstood as neither the public nor the media fully understood the increasingly complexity of their work -- increased

retention at post-compulsory years, greater ethnic diversity, the demand for rapidly expanding new areas of study, requirements to accommodate to increasing centrally-generated edicts and directives, and all of the complexities landed on schools through the wider breakdown of social capital. There are significant questions being raised as to whether the policies followed by government have been part of the solution or part of the problem.

Advanced Skills Teacher: Indications of a Policy Disjuncture

A way into the policy disjuncture of an initiative that was supposed to elevate teachers' self-worth, but ended up being subverted to other ends, is to pose the question: what kind of view of skill was behind the AST process ?

Teaching as an activity is never innocent -- it always: includes some things, while excluding or denying others; celebrates some perspectives and actions, while discouraging and denying others; co-opts, favours and promotes some ways of working with students, while punishing, ignoring or silencing other views of teaching. What constitutes legitimate teaching, therefore, depends on who is doing the defining, and their perception of the valued social ends or purposes to which the teaching is directed. If the attempt is to contain, control or shape teaching to promote national economic imperatives, then teaching will become a tool of micro-economic reform, and will look quite different than if teaching was a genuine attempt to formulate schooling as a more

relevant curriculum response to the complex lives of contemporary youth. Teaching will look different again, if the primary interest is that of parents who want their children to succeed vocationally, or employers who want a literate, numerate and compliant workforce. These multiple and conflicting interpretations of teaching have to struggle to co-exist with each other and arrive at uneasy forms of settlement at particular historical moments. Which set of views gets to have preference over others, is invariably a hotly contested political question, even though the real agenda may be obscured and not always obvious.

In the case of the attempt to construct a view of what constituted "advanced teaching skills" in Australian schools in the early 1990s, there were a number of competing interests and discourses: the official or policy aspirations; the lived realities of how the official policy was acted out at the level of selecting the teachers; and, the accommodation, contestation and resistance displayed by teachers as they acted to give voice to their own local or indigenous definitions of skilful teaching. It was clear that these various constructions were not always heading in the same direction, nor were they one and the same thing. The major point of departure was at the level of the paradigmatic view of teaching -- official views endorsed a

"competencies" approach of displaying attributes, traits and behaviours consistent with a series of pre-formulated criteria; at the level of teachers, there was a regret that the impositional approach was not more nuanced and consistent with teachers' ways that tended to favour storied and narrative styles of portrayal. Teachers often put this in terms of what they saw as skills that endorsed "bureaucratically preferred ways". Teachers became angry when these views of teaching were ranked higher than what teachers themselves regarded as being most important. Some teachers claimed that when criteria of competent teaching were developed external to and at a distance from teaching, rather than being the consequence of a process that was up-close or internal to the understandings of what it meant to be a good teacher, then considerable damage was done. Accumulated wisdom acquired through many years of successful classroom teaching was denigrated because it did not necessarily or readily equate with the skill requirements embodied in the criteria: "experience", "commitment", "status" and "self-esteem" did not necessarily equal skilled teaching as measured through the application of criteria.

Accommodated and Subjugated Knowledges of Teaching

The paradigmatic preference for what amounted to technicist ways of regarding teaching also manifested itself in other ways -- for example, the strong emphasis in the selection process on evidence and what appeared to be a quasi-judicial processes of an adversarial type, in which teachers were required to account for their skills in written form, supported by evidence from in-class observation, at interview, and in response to questioning by a panel. The verification of claims about personal teaching against the standards embodied in criteria, produced levels of tension and frustration that many teachers found difficult to live with.

At another level, teachers found the requirement of having to meet specified criteria as "limiting the boundaries of admissible evidence".

They argued repeatedly that the process of "narrowing down" teaching (some drew the parallel with "dumbing down") to meet criteria, produced a situation in which large and important aspects of teaching were made deliberately "invisible".

For some teachers, this whole approach smacked of having to jump

through criterial hoops, displaying the right amount of policy gloss in terms of familiarity with the latest government ideology, in order to receive a meagre reward. Teachers regarded this as akin to using school sites as conduits for the latest educational ideology, where being rewarded with an acknowledgment of advanced skills teacher, amounted to being a carrier of this new ideology.

Being successful, paradoxically, meant moving spiritually and

linguistically away from the classroom, at least in terms of being able to converse freely in the jargon in order to convincingly demonstrate the ability to mouth the rhetoric. For teachers who were successful, this amounted to a form of policy assimilation of the discourse of the new skills competencies. It was as if skill in teaching was somehow being used as a kind of ideological manoeuvre with which to produce policy conformity. This took the form of the requirement to demonstrate knowledge of systems policy, while the 'gaze' of self-regulation was driven back into routine aspects of teaching. This led, teachers said, to a kind of self-imposed performance accountability of desirable visible teaching traits, which was ultimately corrupting.

Teachers spoke frequently of the guilt they experienced in electing to undergo the process of being selected as an Advanced Skills Teacher. To satisfy the requirements of putting together the very detailed written proposal (often taking weeks or months to prepare), they had to forego the dedicated attention they normally gave to their daily teaching duties, especially out-of-hours activities like evening and weekend marking of student assignment work. In order to become recognised as an Advanced Skills Teacher, it seemed they had to be prepared to become temporarily negligent.

The playing of "language games" through the written application and the subsequent interview was seen as having the effect of devaluing the essence of classroom teaching-- the relational aspects of teaching did not appear to many teachers to be highly regarded. It was more a case of them being required to show that they were competent classroom managers, cognizant of the latest policy issues, and willing and able to implement them. Teachers experienced this separation of "performance against criteria", from the wider lived totality of their self-worth as teachers, as a kind of artificially constructed exposition of a "performance facade".

The presentation of evidence about their teaching to a panel, and the associated interview process, caused a lot of grief among teachers -- one teacher described it as an "ordeal by representation". There was a widely held view that some teachers were better at the "interview game" than others, and that the combative nature of the process needlessly put many in the situation where fear of failure led to "nervous omission, rather than complete and meaningful disclosure" of what they knew about teaching. The view was put that the kind of skill necessary, was one that was about "talking your way around the criteria" and "impressing outsiders", rather than any genuine attempt to get at core understandings about real issues of teaching in complex contemporary circumstances.

There was almost universal condemnation of the situation of discomfort experienced by most teachers in having to engage with "necessary forms of self-promotion" in order to manufacture and manage impression and

performance during the selection process.

Fundamental questions were raised by teachers too, about the value to the school and its wider community of a "personal classification of

skill". For many teachers, teaching is no longer the isolated and insulated activity it used to be, and therefore, to reward individual teachers with an individual classification flies directly in the face of the collaborative reality of the way these teachers experience their work. This point was picked up repeatedly by teachers in the way they talked about the extraordinarily high levels of collegial support they received while enduring the selection process. Many made it clear that without the very tangible assistance of colleagues, they would have been unable to proceed. This raises serious questions about why individual rewards are persisted with when schools themselves refuse to treat teachers as if they were islands. The competitive model is not only out-dated -- it may actually be highly counter-productive to schools.

With the allocation of rewards being such a public process, and so significantly related to the life of schools, this had its drawbacks too. For example, not only was there "shame, humiliation, anger and loss of confidence at failure", but after years of positive peer and community affirmation, good teaching could be quickly shattered through a failure at criterial assessment -- a situation exacerbated by a total absence of any official procedure for "after-the-process" support for individuals who failed to meet up to arbitrarily set and administered standards of good teaching. The inextricable embeddedness of self-worth in teaching, meant that failure produced huge emotional and social disjuncture.

Any teacher agreeing to putting themselves forward for selection as an Advanced Skills Teacher was placing themselves in a situation of considerable personal and professional vulnerability -- the "hidden costs" of being an applicant were not insignificant, in a context where the fissure of misunderstanding over the meaning of competence was always a palpable reality. The literalistic discourse of skills continually rubbed abrasively against the oral tradition of teaching, a circumstance that was bound to produce incongruence between 'professional' and 'criterial' notions of assessment. In brief, there was a deep and irresolvable confusion and tension throughout between the alleged 'celebration' of good teaching, and its actual 'evaluation'.

The form of "contrived collegiality" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 80) that was manufactured through having a peer evaluator on the selection panel, did not wash with most teachers; they were quick to see this shallow contrivance for what it was -- an attempt to disguise traditional bureaucratic forms of evaluation. Well-meaning peer evaluators were

often regarded as lacking credibility, from the vantage point of teachers who were more interested in the benefits to be derived from being part of a genuine learning community -- exchanging ideas, trailing new teaching approaches, and generally supporting one another.

While the overt and demonstrable aspects of being selected as an Advanced Skills Teacher were often spoken about in less than edifying terms by teachers, there were also references to the not so easily seen aspects. Although teachers did not use the term, there was a feeling of complicity of peers in "horizontal violence", as colleagues became implicated in forms of pseudo-ownership of the process through involvement on school-based selection panels.

Teachers' Resistant and Discordant Readings of the AST

One theme that consistently emerged from the interviews was the oral, storied and discursive tradition of teaching as a site of resistance.

The issue of what was admissible and inadmissible as evidence of advanced teaching skills, what was masked, opaque and therefore beyond dispute as criteria, were by no means settled in the eyes of teachers. They were troubled by the approach of dismantling their teaching into "bits and pieces" as if such deconstruction were natural, commonsense and inevitable; they resisted this in the ways they presented accounts that emphasized teaching in its totality.

The relational aspect of teaching, which teachers insisted was at the core of their work, failed to feature prominently in the official criteria. While teachers were certainly keen to receive symbolic recognition of their work, they were unprepared to accept this without challenging the medium of representation, especially where this was at the expense of artificiality. Contestation and politicisation were seen as the most effective antidotes to literal, detached and shallow renditions that failed to judge teaching in the milieu of its connected context. For example, requests for teachers to provide evidence of how their teaching measured up to policy criteria, were interpreted by teachers as criteria being used as invisible carriers of systems policy. Teachers were much more interested in representing their teaching in terms of an experiential, constructed, and localised culture of teaching. Policy was something "experienced in" or "grounded in" this localised definition of teaching, rather than calibrated against centrally devised policy imperatives. In other words, teachers were continually re-framing the discursive boundaries of their teaching, in situations where sharing insights about their teaching was a normal part of a wider community-building process.

There are always multiple and conflicting points of entry into trying to make sense of a topic as complex as policy changes to teachers'

work. We want to step out a little and try and develop a platform around which to conjure up some images with which to progressively worry discussion of the topic, rather than provide any kind of definitive, in-depth, completed or scholarly treatment. This is a slightly risky activity, but one that has the potential to advance our thinking beyond what might be possible if we were to take a more conventional framework and run with that.

The view of teaching as seen through our own research and that of colleagues, constructs an image of policy support for a "preferred teacher" -- one who is prepared to focus on designated agenda; willing to accept a view of teaching constructed by others at a distance from the classroom; technically competent as measured by generic skills; displaying necessary collaboration and teamwork skills that don't threaten the aims of the organization; able to match practice to criteria as required; and, above all, possessing a compliant and flexible disposition.

The organizing icons that frame this notion of the preferred teacher seem to be around an identity that increasingly regards schools and classrooms as sites to be more "effectively managed" and where "teaching" is now almost synonymous with "managing" (Tavares, 1996). This notion of generic 'management for all seasons', whether it be of students, colleagues, or knowledge, is heavily derivative of an ideology that classrooms have always been places to be managed -- the only difference now, is that it is management to satisfy the whims of transnational capital through the economy and the market.

Conclusion

An emerging cameo of the "preferred teacher" constructed by current policy manoeuvres might go something like this.

Teaching is increasingly being constructed as work in which there needs to be maximum opportunity for a flexible response to customer needs, where the teacher is hired and dispensed with as demand and fashion dictates. This ethos of schools as marketplaces means a differentiated mix of teachers, some of whom are fully qualified, others who are cheaper to employ for short periods of time and who can rapidly be moved around within auxiliary and support roles to help satisfy growing niche markets. Coupled with this is a mindset in which the teacher is required to act as a kind of pedagogical entrepreneur continually having regard to selling the best points of the school, promoting image and impression, and generally seeking to maximise the school's market share by ensuring that it ranks high in competitive league tables. A crucial element of this educational commodity approach to teachers' work is the attention to calculable and measurable aspects of the work, especially educational outputs, for without that kind of information

the capacity of the school to successfully promote itself will be severely circumscribed. There will be a need for the teacher to be a team member within the corporate culture of the school, always mindful that anything she may do will impact in some way on the schools' outside image. However, team membership which will sometimes be glorified with terms like "collegiality", "partnerships" and "collaboration" will reside very much at the operational and implementation level, for to involve teachers in strategic decision making might be to threaten the wider mission of the school. Interactions with students will occur within an overall framework of 'valued added' in which students are 'stakeholders', continually deserving of receiving educational value for money. Teaching will be increasingly managerial in nature, both as teachers are managed, and in turn, themselves manage others -- there will be clear line- management arrangements with each layer providing appropriate performance indicator information to the level above it about the performance of individual students against objectives, and the success of the teacher herself in meeting school targets and performance outcomes. The remuneration of both the teacher and the school will be based on attaining these agreed performance targets.

This sketch may not be that inaccurate, for as one teacher in the UK put it nearly a decade ago:

I think we can predict what schools will look like by the end of the century. A much increased private sector, government specials, . . . and at the bottom, an under-resourced state sector. You won't be able to tell the difference between supermarkets and schools. Middle-class areas will have Marks and Spencers types of schools, and corner-shop types for the inner-city. Marketing, targeting and performance indicators will be the language of education. Heads getting together boasting about the quality of their sponsors. We'll have cigarettes and beer advertised in the school and we'll be told that it improves the pupils' discussion skills, to prepare them to make real choices in the real world. This lies behind all the policy changes now taking place. They're not as benign as they look. It would have seemed like fantasy ten years ago. Now, you are regarded as a liberal reactionary if you oppose the brave new world (Ghail, 1991, p. 299).

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