Researching the Cultural Politics of Teachers' Learning

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Teacher Learning through Teacher Theorising

Teachers worldwide are currently experiencing 'difficult times' as their work is assailed, prevailed upon, reformed and restructured almost beyond recognition by forces bent upon devolution, marketisation, de-professionalisation, and intensification. Increasingly impoverished enclosures are being constructed around teachers and their work in the form of measures designed to calibrate teaching more, thus supposedly leading to improved productivity and accountability (Smyth, 1995; Smyth, Shacklock & Hattam, 1997). The effects of these new technolgies of power, which take the form of competencies, appraisal and effectiveness, is to subjugate teachers' indigenous forms of knowledge through a constant process of the politics of derision (see Smyth & Shacklock, 1998). There are, however, instances of discourses of resistance as teachers find ways of keeping alive dialogue about what works in classrooms and schools as they craft, analyse and test local theories of pedagogy and school organisation.

This chapter uses sociological ways of theorising and thematising a generic category that has become moribund and under-theorised -- it is sometimes called teachers' "lifelong learning", "workplace learning", or *in situ* "professional development". In this chapter I use the term "teacher learning" as a way of describing how teachers make sense of the increasing complexity of their world and their work of teaching. The kind of categories just referred to do not on their own have the intellectual capacity to carry us very far in explaining how teachers survive and thrive (or not) in later modernity. One way into this perplexity might be to 'read' teachers' work off against what it is that constitutes the centrality of the work; that is to say, the engagement of teachers with the lives, aspirations, frustrations, experiences, hopes and desires of young people. Understanding, engaging with, and trying to concretely change the life chances of young people is, after all, what teaching is supposed to fundamentally be about. It is far to simplistic to argue that teachers enact a mediating role, although they are certainly a central influence for good or ill in the transition

of the young to adulthood and work. But, teachers are also embedded in and constantly learning reflexively about the world in which young people are experimenting, struggling, acting upon and being "done to". Herein lies an important intersection (or is it a juxtaposition?) that I want to dwell on for a few moments.

I want to start out by talking about one major research project I am currently involved in, The Teachers' Learning Project, but I will also introduce into the background ideas coming from a second major one,The Students Completing Schooling Project, because of the way the latter is providing us with powerful revelations of how it is that young people make decisions whether to stay on or leave schooling in the post-compulsory years. It is not possible, in the end to talk about teachers' work without also making some incursions into the world and experiences of students, despite the fact that much research tries to proceed as if these were artificially separated.

The Teachers' Learning Project came about through the confluence of four things: first, a 30 year personal history of interest in, and having worked as a teacher, and then having intensively studied the cultures, lives and working experiences of many teachers; second, a disturbing personal reaction to discussion in the wider public and political spheres to the work of teaching which is frequently denigrated, trivialised and technicised, in addition to always being misunderstood -- that fired a passion within me to correct the misperception; thirdly, success in securing a 3 year grant from the Australian Research Council and the willingness of the South Australian Department for Education and Children's Services to collaborate in the project; and finally, a feeling that while the academy had expended much energy in studying teachers and teaching over the past couple of decades, that this amounted to very little in terms of clarifying the complexity of this apparently mysterious process.

The Students Completing Schooling Project, another 3 year Australian Research Council funded collaborative project, emerged out of a concern that the dramatic changes in the economy in the late 1980s had produced a situation of "forced retention" (Dwyer, 1994) that was followed in the 1990s by a dramatic decline in the apparent attractiveness of schooling to large numbers of young people who came the realisation that further schooling was not necessarily a guarantee of entry to full time, well paid, secure, and meaningful work. In this project we were trying to access the complexities of how students make decisions about leaving school and what is occurring in their lives at school and beyond as they make these decisions.

Clearly, these two projects intersect in crucial ways as young people and teachers work to establish relationships and understand how the culture of the school works at assisting forms of identity formation that are empowering or disabling. As Furlong & Cartmel (1997) note, contemporary teaching and learning in schools involves embracing "new scenarios" and confronting "old barriers" in all areas of social life including schooling, its connection to the labour market, and spheres that appear further removed like politics and consumption (Warde "preface" to Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Both Beck (1992) and Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) argue that all of us, and even moreso the young, live within a "risk culture" and a "risk society" where there is a "growing disjuncture between objective and subjective dimensions of life" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 4). Lifestyles have become increasingly individualised, in contexts where social divisions and social inequalities continue to "exert a powerful hold over people's lives" (p. 4). People are "progressively freed from social networks and constraints of the old order" (p. 3) but are forced to confront and "negotiate a new set of hazards which impinge in all aspects of their day to day lives" (p. 3). The wider forces of the social and political economy operate in highly structured ways to continue to shape people's lives, at the same time as they "increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis" (p. 4). This "epistemological fallacy" as Furlong & Cartmel

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(1997, p. 5) term it, constitutes a situation where social and economic existence is still structured by larger forces (even moreso than in the past), but people are increasingly confronted by and experience "fragmentation of social structures" and the weakening of "collective identities" (p. 5). What occurs is "an intensification of individualisation as more people are placed in unpleasant situations which they interpret as being due, in part, to their own failures" (p. 5). While this is not the place to give a detailed treatment of these ideas, suffice to say for the moment that teachers' work is continually being shaped and reshaped by the need to mediate new sets of life chances for the young, working with them to negotiate their inequitable vulnerability to risk, while trying to craft a new pedagogy that takes account of lives and that holds out at least some hope for managing the inversion where "wealth accumulates at the top, and risk at the bottom" (Beck, 1992, p. 35). I will now turn my attention, in the main, to the Teachers' Learning Project.

It is important in starting this paper not to underplay the importance of the underlying factors giving rise to the project in the first place, because in a real sense they have had a tangible effect on its formulation, enactment, and the way in which teachers have subsequently reacted and responded to what we asked of them. There were three aspects we were especially mindful of:

> (i) teachers' work has undergone some dramatic changes in the past few years and in many respects is barely recognisable from what it was a decade ago; just keeping track of how and in what ways teachers acquire, hold and modify the repertoire of sophisticated knowledge required to be an effective teacher, is a major difficulty not least because it resides largely in the private granary of the oral culture of teaching;

> (ii) our capacities as researchers to get privileged access to the complex work lives of teachers, is still very crude by any standards. Because most of us do not have the resources necessary to do the extremely detailed ethnographic studies, this has meant that we have had to cut corners, quite severely on occasions with a resultant loss of quality information -- this presented those of us in the Teachers' Learning Project with an interesting methodolgical challenge of how to faithfully capture information about the breadth, diversity, richness, and uniqueness of teacher learning, with finite resources;

> (iii) the increasingly muscular ways in which policy makers have sought to spot-weld education onto the economy as an engine for economic growth, has the prospect of doing considerable violence to the local indigenous ways in which teachers think and operate pedagogically, and how this thinking informs how they act in relation to their own and their students' learning.

What we were interested in at the outset was the phenomenon of teachers as learners, but not of the individual factoid type; that is to say, how lone teachers accumulate contrived repertoires of effective teaching to be paraded when needed. Rather, our interest was in how teachers were able to politically harness the structures of their schools so as to make them work for students in more inclusive and democratic ways. To use the shorthand phrase we adopted, we were interested in the "dialogic school" in which teaching was construed as a social practice that occurred in interpretive communities where the intent was to engage others (teachers, parents, students, and administration) in issues of substance around sustaining a culture of learning.

While the quest is by no means complete, it has not lead us down the predictable path of the elusive but largely unproductive correlates of effective teaching. It is true that we were on a mission -- searching for the broader set of conditions within which the archetype teacher as

learner was embedded, but in this instance our investigative journey has produced three inter-related aspects that seem to profoundly pre-form whether teachers will be active learners of the culture and context of their teaching. First, there is the existence of democratic practices and policies that underlie the work of teaching; second, there is the set of coherent school support structures that assist teachers; and third, there is a shared public discourse within the school and its community about teaching and learning.

In many respects these three aspects may appear on the surface to be a fairly unexceptional and commonsense set of ideals, but in reality our experience has shown that they are far from widespread and certainly not universally endorsed or followed in practice. Indeed, they often run counter to recently introduced educational policies that reinscribe hierarchy, that technicise and codify teaching through measurement and accountability, and that foster an atmosphere of competition and distrust among teachers in the quest to supposedly satisfy customer choice, principles of user-pays, and the quasi-marketisation of schooling. In this project we have found that teachers reacted differently to these external reforms -- from compliance to outright rejection. But, some schools have a more sophisticated process of filtering policies developed at a distance from the school through their existing professional ideologies, perspectives and identities to produce "resistance within accommodation" (Troman, 1996, p. 473).

Some schools and teachers have quite sophisticated ways of crafting 'visions' about who they are and what they regard as being important, that are markedly at variance with the visions perpetrated by visionaries outside of schools. How schools enact and live out their vision has a lot to do with the way teachers construct a culture of what it means to be a teacher and to 'have a life' as a teacher -- making sense of opposition, and moving beyond merely resisting, to adopting strategic action with and through the school community. This capacity of schools to create re-generating capacities for themselves; to debate, contest and innovate, even in difficult and turbulent times, seems to have a lot to do with a shared understanding and commitment to the construction of a wider public discourse about the democratic nature of schooling. It differs markedly according to whether the school falls int the archetype of being "un-renewing", "collaborative", or "critically colaborative".

When one of the case study schools in the Teachers' Learning Project in effect said to us that they had a vision or a primary purpose of managing social justice within a democratic framework of relationships within the school and its community, we were understandably excited.

That a school had somehow found not only the will but also the pedagogic spaces (Macedo, 1994, p. 137) within which to supplant the authoritative discourses of economic rationalism through attempting to recreate a sense of "civic discovery" (Reich, 1988), seemed to us remarkable, and we suspected fairly uncommon. It seemed to us that this could only be possible through what Bakhtin (1981, p. 342) calls "internally persuasive discourse" -- those ways of thinking and acting on the world that "engage us from within, rather than impose itself from without". Compared to the authoritative discourses of schools as engines for economic growth, what we were hearing was an account of how a school had found a way to tackle the wider "flight from democracy" (Plank & Boyd, 1994) gripping western societies in general and schools in particular. While the indigenous alternative we were encountering was much more untidy, open to the accusation of being less rigorous, less definitive, less tightly structured, and less muscular than the outcomes, accountability driven, pre-formulated and compliant alternative preferred by politicians and policy makers, what we were witnessing seemed to be much more in tune with the desires, aspirations and realities of this particular school and its wider community. It was true that this grassroots approach was less quantifiable, specifiable in advance, more risk-prone because if its inherent uncertainty, and more likely to be hijacked by interest groups -- its redeeming feature was

that it was precisely the kind of model that could be fashioned as it went, with all of the political compromises and settlements necessary to make it work because it had extensive and continual ownership by the school itself.

The Dialogic School

I can best draw together this opening section of the paper by briefly alluding to some of the emerging themes of the dialogic school that presented themselves to us in some of the schools we studied. Again, rather than engage in boring and superficial descriptions of the schools, I will instead sketch out the broad features of the archetype dialogic school. In employing this notion of the archetype, what I am doing is attempting to go considerably beyond the surface facade of the school as it presents itself to us and which are usually captured in observational and interpretive studies. Critical research of the kind we do looks for the deep forms, structures, moulds, models, patterns and themes that pre-figure and underlie what it is we encounter in the fieldwork.

Pedagogy of the Question

When a school is prepared to step out in its policies and its actions and actively promote the importance of questions over answers, then this is a significant statement about the importance it ascribes to openness over closure. This is all the more significant when the philosophy pervades the practices of the school. Contestation, controversy, discussion and debate are considered preferable to certainty, stability, compliance or decree in this school. Questioning the status quo and how it came to be, are never far off the agenda here. Issues of poverty, disadvantage and discrimination are never taken at face value whether in the classroom or the school, but are regarded as social constructions that need and deserve interrogation not only within the school and its community, but society at large.

Resistance within Accommodation

In the current climate of rapid socio-political change in schools in which "private troubles" are underpinned by "public issues" (Mac an Ghaill, 1991), there is a lot of institutional pressure on teachers to conform to a particular preferred view of teaching, learning and curriculum. Indeed, the trend toward market-led innovation in education, with schools having to manage image and impression in competing with one another, produces an inevitable tension between what teachers know is best based on professional judgement, and what school systems require, driven by market-led ideological forces. Change is, therefore, not a simple linear process but inextricably bound up with the "multi-faceted nature of current curriculum change", "the school's internal power relations, with its multi-faceted elements of control, legitimacy, dominance, accommodation and resistance", and individual's "careers, ideological commitments and actions" (Mac an Ghaill, 1991, p. 302). In other words, because of the way in which changes are being set up outside of schools, there is bound to be a clash of aspirations especially in schools that have a concern for social justice. These schools continually ask the question of outside initiated activities: "How will this work to re-dress the already least advantaged?". There is a continual re-shaping of externally derived agenda to make them fit the interests of those in school who are disadvantaged.

Continually Re-focussing Change

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of schools that successfully manage democratic processes around a commitment to social justice, is that they are able to continually re-position what they do in the daily life of the school, with an eye firmly fixed on the "bigger picture". Change for them is a cascading affair, rather than something that is driven out of mandates, despair, or that even inheres in events. They see change opportunistically, as a

way of strategically taking advantage of situations that present themselves to the school. These schools have extremely well-tuned antennae, able to quickly work out what are "hot topics" and go after them, especially where resources are concerned, but always in ways that enable them to fulfil their bigger vision of improving the life chances of <u>all</u> children. They have an almost uncanny ability to keep an eye on the real action, when others around them are distracted by the side-shows. Like most other things in these schools, structures are never fixed; they are always tentative and provisional.

<u>Communicative Competence</u>

Schools of the kind we are concerned with here are talkative places -- people continually converse with one another about teaching and learning. Knowledge is not private or closeted -- individuals take pride in sharing what they know, and it is a central part of the way the school operates, swapping and exchanging ideas that work, keeping in mind that what works for one person on one occasion may not readily transfer for somebody else on another occasion. Part of this penchant for communication emerges from a need to theorise and re-theorise what is going on, what works, how they know, and how things might be done differently. Teaching is not a solitary or private activity -- it is very public, and a major way of breaking down isolationism is to have challenging discussions of teaching and learning solidly located on the official agenda of the school.

<u>Centrality of Enunciative Space</u>

The issue of space, in the sense of room to manoeuvre with ideas (Spivak, 1988), is crucial to the way these kind of schools operate. Because social justice is the central organising feature, they need ways of working that move them beyond the distressed state increasingly characterising many other schools. Having space to them means acknowledging that experts generate "enclosures" (Rose & Miller, 1992), and that they actively close down the spaces in which people can speak. What these schools need are spaces of "regulated confrontation" (Bourdieu, 1991) where people feel they have an "entitlement to speak" (Fine, 1992, p. 25). The creation of these radical spaces (Ladwig, 1996) in which the "moral ascendancy of managerialism" (Inglis, 1989) is able to be challenged and kept in check, means that issues of poverty, discrimination, marginalisation and disadvantage are not allowed to "disappear from the social surface" (Bannerji, 1987) -- they are continually confronted and worked through in the "contours of the [otherwise] oppressive relations of teaching" (Ng, 1995).

Put most directly, because the archetype dialogic schools regards itself primarily as a moral community concerned with the politics of self, school and community enablement, it is continually pushing up against the edges of its "pedagogical comfort zone" (Macedo, 1994, p. 170) in its naming of inequitable social and economic arrangements.

The Methodology of 'Voiced Research'

Teaching is an oral and storied culture -- a feature which has yet to be properly acknowledged by existing research approaches. The account I am representing here starts from the presumption that teachers have important stories to tell about their work, the context of schooling, and the structures that support and inhibit teacher learning.

The term "voiced research" is a relatively new way of characterising the bringing into the picture of perspectives previously excluded, muted, or silenced by dominant structures and discourses (Denzin, 1995; LeCompte, 1993; Lincoln, 1995; Fine, 1991; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Schratz, 1992; Weis, 1990). In the case of schools, they have been relentlessly assaulted over the past several decades by policies, practices and discourses of hierarchy,

marketisation and managerialism -- notions that are not only foreign to schools, but that are anathema to the ethos of collaboration, civility, community and democracy. It may seem strange to be talking about the numerically large group of inhabitants of schools as constituting a subjugated group, but in a real sense the under-representation of their lifeworlds in official discourses of education places them in this vulnerable position. Voiced research starts out from the position that interesting things can be said and garnered from groups who do not necessarily occupy the high moral, theoretical or epistemological ground -- they actually may be quite lowly and situated at some distance from the centres of power. As Grumet (1990) put it, the promise of voiced research is anchored in local knowledge in the face of objective, normative, hegemonic forms of knowledge. Shacklock & Smyth (1997) claim that "In the telling of stories of life, previously unheard, or silenced, voices open up the possibility for new, even radically different, narrations of life experience" (p. 4).

Voiced research is, therefore, political in that it has an explicit agenda of reinserting in multiple ways, opportunities for expression that have been expunged because dominant social visions hold sway. There is always continual struggle over whose views get to be represented and smaller voices, those which are less audible, get "drowned out by others louder, more dominant, and putatively more epistemically legitimate" (Shacklock & Smyth, 1997, p. 4). In respect of schools, who gets to speak for and on behalf of schools and who get listened to, is an artefact of power and who gets to exercise it. With the growing tendency of regarding schools as annexes of industry in the quest for enhanced international economic competitiveness, it is not hard to see how the guys from the big end of town wind up with their ideologies, policies, language and practices being promulgated as being unproblematically good for schools, teachers and children. In these circumstances teachers are treated rather like exiles even in their own pedagogical worksites, frequently disparaged as holding deviant viewpoints, and continually having to challenge and supplant dominant beliefs. This becomes most noticeable when the focus of schools bears upon competencies, outcomes, performance indicators, measurement, testing, and the like, to the virtual exclusion of matters of social justice, the structural features that created and sustained injustices in the first place, critical forms of teaching and learning that unmask wider social injustice, and practices that might make schooling operate to redress inequality and positively enhance the life chances of the already least advantaged students.

What then characterises a voiced research approach ?

Because of its epistemological commitment to a more democratised research agenda, voiced research has to be construed in such a way that it provides a genuine space within which teachers as educational practitioners can reveal what is real for them. This means that research questions can only really emerge out of "purposeful conversations" (Burgess, 1988), rather than interviews (whether structured or unstructured). The operation of the power dimension in an interview where the researcher has the question and he/she is trying to extract data from the interviewee, has all of the wrong hallmarks for a more participatory approach. The notion that what is worthwhile investigating may reside with the research informant and may only be revealed when a situation of trust and rapport is established, can rest somewhat uneasily with some researchers. Not having tightly pre-formulated questions but being sufficiently confident in the capacity of teachers as research informants to come up with research questions that are sufficiently 'respectable', is a very different game even for many qualitative researchers. At issue is who has the power to determine what is a worthwhile or robust research question, and teachers as informants are in a vulnerable position in this regard. When taken seriously, this represents a significant reversal of the way power generally tends to operate in research projects; the researchers know, and teachers are expected to willingly comply in supplying information. Voiced research reverses those dynamics of power.

Starting from situations of immediacy for the research informants can generate more than a few tensions for the resource-strapped researcher who is usually being propelled by an external funding agency agenda to get the most for the least unit of resource input in a timely fashion. Having discussions stall, reverse, go down cul-de-sacs, and head off on incomprehensible tangents, is a constant and real test of the authenticity of the researcher and his/her democratic commitment to this apparently less structured style of research. Exploring and explicating complexity does not rest at all easily with the requirement of policy makers for rendering, simplicity, reduction and utility in research -- all aspects that run counter to voiced research with its tendency towards cacophony, multiplicity and idiosyncrasy.

Voiced research can also be argued to have a high level of credibility, at least from the vantage point of school practitioners. This extensive street credibility derives from the embeddedness of this kind of research in the lives, experiences and aspirations of teachers, and it is this feature that makes it so compelling for other classroom practitioners who may choose to read it. At the same time, this feature may be the cause of some considerable loss of respectability with large segments of the academy. It really comes down to the audience question -- who is the research meant to inform or be useful to ? Readers of this kind of research are able to resonate with the images, issues, messages, language, and the fact that complexity, contradiction and struggle of other teachers' lives spill out in lively and recognisable ways into the account, rather than being laundered or leached out. This is what makes voiced research valid -- it is believable !

There is an important pedagogical issue in voiced research -- it provides a prominent opportunity for practitioner theorising. Theorising is something in other forms of research that is the prerogative of qualified outsiders, once compliant practitioners have been conveniently milked. Where voiced research differs is in the way it is predicated on a certain degree of sense-making in situ by virtue of the willing participation of the research informant. The give-and-take of the research opportunity offered the subject invites a certain degree of identity formation previously out of reach -- I call this active practitioner theorising.

What I am getting at here is that often the question posed by the outsider is the first time the informant has been confronted by the issue and in responding is literally constructing for the first time an inchoate discourse around the issue; in this sense, data are not so much being "collected" as "constructed" then and there on the spot. We often witness this in the struggle informants have with tightly structured questions -- they are not their questions, or even ones that they have thought about before. There is hence the need to start from a vantage point that leaves them with plenty of scope to sculpt an account more indicative of the terrain they are coming from.

The style of research being described here is interrogative -- but not on the sense of boring into the voluntary informants who so graciously put their lives on the line. The kind of interrogation I have in mind is of the contexts and dominant discourses that envelope the everyday lives and experiences of teachers, and that are held in place by hegemonic ideologies, paradigms and world views. One of the aspirations of voiced research is to provide a platform, vulnerable though it might be, by which dominant discourses on the way teaching and schooling are represented, might be unmasked and shown as representing "new management regimes" (Gewirtz, 1997) while denying, denigrating or silencing the "disruptive underlife" (Gutierrez, Larson & Kreuter, 1995) of schools. In this sense, voiced research makes no pretence to be detached; rather, it is avowedly disruptive and interruptive of the political status quo. Teachers are invited to be socially critical readers of their own biographies and histories and to move beyond "narratives of denial" to "narratives of complexity" (Fine & Weis, 1998).

Situating, Locating and Interrogating the Study

One of the distinguishing features of the emergent style of voiced research that we are doing in the context of South Australian schools where we are focussing on how teachers understand, redesign, and reshape teaching and schooling while in the process of doing it, is the notion of the reflexive -- both for us and for the teachers we are working with. We are trying to interrogate the lives, the contexts and the circumstances of the participants, but against the background of the broader social, political and economic forces operating to shape those lives and experiences. In this respect the research is pedagogical in the way it is trying to both (re)present voice, but in ways that show that through its very creation there is "struggle for voice" (Walsh, 1991).

In the earlier parts of this chapter I have spoken at some length of the wider issues and the methodological agenda that have come with it. What I wish to turn to now is some brief speculation about the limitations and shortcomings if this style of research that give me pause for reflection. These ideas are highly speculative at this stage, but it is important that they see the light of day in innovative approaches like this. At the outset, in the fieldwork phase we were, in Foley's (1998) terms, "trying to rupture the text by depleting it of jargon". There was a decided element of the 'confessional' in what we were inviting teachers to tell us, with opening gamuts like, "tell us what life is like for you at the moment, and how did it get to be that way?". Embarking on this kind of autobiographical approach was a necessary starting point, but as we found out, it was also a process in which the deconstruction of categories was susceptible to either "over listening" or "under listening". Over listening might be characterised as being too attentive to the lives, issues and circumstances raised by teachers, and being blind to the wider forces making things the way they are. In other words, the detail of what teachers say about their everyday lives becomes so absorbing that bigger structural and institutional aspects get underplayed. This can be a real danger when the anecdotal and autobiographical is allowed to operate in an unrestrained way. It ought to be the case that this kind of research is not blind to the wider categories and forces shaping teachers' work, but is concerned about how the researcher and the researched simultaneously construct one another without caracturising or essentialising the other. Categories still need to be present in this kind of research, but in a way in which they can be used to read off lived experience, as well as be re-shaped by those experiences. To re-work a quote from Inglis (1985) -- there is no such things as categoryless lives, only poorly understood categories ! On the other hand we need to guard against allowing the theories and categories we bring to fieldwork become the undifferentiated containers into which lives get unceremoniously poured (Lather, 1986). This is what I call "under listening", in which voices, experiences, lives and aspirations of informants are in danger of being ridden over by the categories, theories, paradigms and the issues of researchers. Trying to maintain a balance here can be a tricky business, especially when trying not to over-romanticise accounts in either direction.

To give an example from the Teachers' Learning Project. We had begun the fieldwork and had retreated to do some writing to make sense of what we were hearing in order to 'build up a picuture' (Teachers' Learning Project, 1996). We thought we had done a sophisticated job of sketching out a complete and multi-layered account of the arche-type of a teacher-as-learner. We had waxed and waned eloquently about:

> • democratic practices and policies that underpin all aspects of teaching and learning;
>
> • coherent structures which support and enhance teachers' learning and pedagogical practices;

- teachers' learning as part of a shared public discourse;

- the importance of social justice;

- the dialogic school and developing discursive communities;

- reistance and competing discourses.

It seemed that in our attempt to provide a sophisticate initial reading of the complexity of what we had learned about teachers' learning, that our Teachers' Field Group (a collection of critical friends that we met regularly with, and who were classroom teachers but not involved in the fieldwork sites), revealed that our account was "too utopian"! They said that while we had captured an interesting snapshot of the complexity of teachers' lives, we had been short on descriptions of the pathway by which others might advance to the point described in our accounts. In other words, we had done a nice job of getting to the point of a school pre-occupied with the notion of a community of learning teachers, but we had given little thought to how this came to be possible. It seemed that this 'reality check' was an important interruption to the theorising and thematising of our work in this project, and it served to alert us to the fact that rendering a case of complexity employing voiced approaches can be more difficult than we think.

Another issue we had to tangle with was that of getting up-close to the lives of the teachers we were studying through extended periods of fieldwork, but often in ways that brought with it a certain degree of informality, familiarity and requests for reciprocity. This took the form of invitations to provide professional development activities as the school struggled with how to keep professional learning a priority. This was perfectly understandable, but it created moral and ethical choices for us about returning some of the hospitality extended to us, how far we should go, and whether this might blunt the "critical edge" of our research. How to do this without becoming too heavily implicated in the lives of the people we were trying to study, while not being off-handed by refusing, was something that tested our capacity to realistically draw lines in the sand. While we can make no claim to have definitively resolved issues like these and others, we did at least give them a fair airing at regular weekly meetings of our research team, and somehow still sustained amicable relationships with the school.

The kind of research approach I have just outlined has embedded within it an implicit but passionate commitment to engaging with the wider collapse of dialogic space within schools and the prevailing approaches to educational research which reinforce teachers' loss of entitlement to speak. I've tried to show how, through a different approach to research, that it is possible to begin some reversal, particularly when teachers are given an opportunity to theorise the "crisis circumstances of educational change . . . [through redeeming] 'locally' and 'particularly' certain events of the problematic situation" (Payne & Hickey, 1997, p. 101). My claim is that when research starts from within the lives, experiences, circumstances and aspirations of teachers -- while still keeping an eye firmly fixed on the broader forces shaping the work of teaching -- then it is still possible to be hopeful and optimistic. There is indeed a process of reclamation going on, one that is purposeful, principled and pedagogical in the dialogue it makes possible between teachers and researchers. A related aspect of this is the restoration these conversations make possible in the increasingly tarnished and contrived arena of collegiality and collaboration (Smyth, 1991; Smyth, 1996; Fielding, 1997). My view is that we can move these notions out of the liberal cul-de-sac in which they have become lodged by arguing that the purpose to which they should be directed is the re-instating of intense conversations around social justice as an educational agenda in schools. If researching teaching is to have any part in this then it has to be around having a critical

sensibility to interrogating and unmasking dominant discourses about the way teachers' work ought to be.

Re-affirming the Local, the Political and the Cultural in Researching Teachers' Learning

In this final section I want to briefly draw together the two strands of this paper. In the first instance, I have probably dwelt long enough in the previous section on the reflexive process of "calling the place of the investigator into question" (Spivak, 1988, p. 271) as a careful reassessment is made of how and in what ways the research method adds to the understanding of a process as complex as researching the lives of teachers. The second part, and here I will be a little more expansive, relates to the substantive revelations of how teachers learn within the cultural politics of teaching. There has been much that has been said and will continue to be said about this aspect, so let me limit myself to the most obvious aspects that have presented themselves to us in the Teachers' Learning Project. They can be best represented as a kind of "constellation" -- a grouping or assemblage of related elements that hold one another in a recognisable relationship.

Firstly, we were surprised (although we should not have been) about the central importance to teachers of the dialogic, or the socially constructed nature of knowledge about teaching. It seemed that there was a deeply held imperative among teachers to share ideas and ideals and to not back off from having, as one teacher put it, "feisty debates" about alternatives.

Second, it was also clear to us that while time on its own was an insufficient factor, there was certainly a requirement to build "conversation time" into schools through deliberate processes of resourcing, even where schools themselves might have to take tough decisions about what had to go or how they were going to work more efficiently for this to happen.

Third, and not unrelated, the school structures had to reflect and support this "capacity building" (Seddon, 1998) aspect of the dialogical. Without a commitment to democratic decision making, genuine power sharing, and the need to continually (re)affirm and encourage risk-taking, then the kind of inquisitive culture of innovation so central to building forms of teachers' learning, simply would not occur. In other words, the creation of a school culture built around 'talking' about the work of teaching was something not to be taken for granted, but rather struggled for at a school-wide level as part of a wider regenerative agenda for all teachers. In short, it amounted to a pre-disposition towards theory-building and theory-testing.

Fourth, the schools that we witnessed up close were not afraid to collect and confront information about what was happening around them, and beyond. But, in particular, they had a single-minded focus on the prominent place of successful student learning in their schema; issues of curriculum, pedagogy and learning were given prominence over governments' economic agenda, managerialism, testing, competencies, and other skilling agenda. This was a position that required more than a little courage as teachers had to carefully weigh up what they were prepared to take from "systems directives" which often had a quite different headset. They had to use the 'high trust' settings they had sculpted to carefully work through the perplexity of the daily moral choices of what was to count as learning for all children -- not just a privileged few. This often required confronting habit, challenging the taken-for-granted, and resisting the nonsensical --- often all at the same time. This meant more than adopting some kind of romantic child-centred view of teaching, but having the courage to work through what resourced-based views of teacher-centred learning might look like in an inquiry-oriented culture of inquisitiveness.

Fifth, leadership was not something that was construed hierarchically in schools where teachers were active learners. Rather, it tended to be more "distributive" or "provisional" and dependent upon what expertise was required and where it happened to be located at a particular moment. Construed in this way, there were many leaders in schools, and not all of them were accorded the official title of leader!

Sixth, these were sites where the now fashionable notion of the devolved school had taken hold. It was true that this had occurred because the state had unceremoniously backed off from its constitutional responsibility of adequately resourcing public schooling, and schools were expected to dutifully move in to fill the fiscal void. Notwithstanding, these were places where devolution meant above all breaking down the shackles of bureaucracy, freeing teachers from isolation and privatism, and where parents and the community had a legitimate role in a coherent school development planning process around devising socially just alternatives to hierarchies of all kinds -- managerial, gendered, racist and class-based.

Finally, these were schools where teacher learning hinged very much around a pervading understanding that teaching is an avowedly political activity, and that to take political action by lobbying for a viewpoint was a respectable not a grubby thing to do. To not have a viewpoint and to defer instead to some dominant status quo, was the cardinal sin of being a non-learning teacher.

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