Undamaging 'damaged' teachers: reclaiming teachers’ pedagogical work

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Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Fremantle, December 2001
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This paper starts out by focusing on the extensive damage being done to teachers work around the world through processes of neo-liberal economic reforms. But to focus only on the effects would be far too depressing. Instead, the paper moves to point somewhat more optimistically to what needs to be done to turn this situation around, and draws upon some particular instances in which this has occurred.

But before doing that, however, there is a need to briefly sketch out something of teachers’ existential reality. To take the example of the state of Victoria, Australia, where the work of teaching has become so unattractive that the Australian Council of Deans of Education (2001) predicted that by 2005 that the state would only be able to supply 59 percent of secondary teachers and 69 percent of primary (elementary) teachers. Typical of the way the work of teaching is coming to be perceived, one ex-public school teacher in that state described the accountability requirements such that teachers are “just shelf-stackers in a curriculum factory” (B. Long, 2001, p. 14). Teachers can see very clearly the effects of fifteen years of embracing globalisation and free market theories has had on their work through the depletion of the teaching ranks and are quite adamant that these policies “. . . have finally come home to roost” (Malamidis, 2001, p. 14). But while Australia’s teachers are clear about the effects of recent policy reforms, there is still much official policy deafness, to the point where there is a growing acceptance that “a clever country wouldn’t treat its teachers like this” (S. Long, 2001, p. 22) (the reference being to a previous prime minister who proclaimed Australia to be the ‘clever’ country).

This phenomenon of a shrinking teaching force is not uniquely Australian. Estimates of a looming teacher shortage suggest that in the next five years Canada will experience a shortage of 15,000 teachers, and the USA a shortfall of 220,000 teachers, equal to almost the entire Canadian teaching force (Easingwood, 2001, p. A11). There has also been extensive media coverage in England recently about growing teacher shortages, low teacher morale, worsening conditions of teachers’ work, and the need to reconsider the overall direction of educational policy to try and head off the deepening crisis.

While these disturbing trends are by no means new, I want to advance them somewhat by invoking Stanley Aronowitz’s (1993) category of “cultural strife” in his intriguing book entitled Role Over Beethoven: the Return of Cultural Strife. I take Aronowitz to be on about the intense struggle going on within "a sea change in the nature of legitimate intellectual knowledge" (p. xi). Likewise, I want to engage in "making trouble" (Fendler, 1999) around what is happening to teachers’ work and propose that teacher education, of a particular kind, has a crucial part to play. Inevitably, this will draw me into "an intervention rather than a neutral account" (p. xi) of these issues, but it is as well that I come clean at the outset.

In trying both to make sense of the ‘problem’ and advance a ‘solution’ I will draw from some reflective biographical slices that come from a recently completed Australian Research Council funded project entitled The Teachers’ Learning Project (1996-1999). The study produced some "compressed ethnographies" (Walford, 1994, p. 94) that give a window on the complexities surrounding teachers’ work. In Ozga & Gewirtz’s (1994) terminology, undertaking inquiry from this vantage point can produce an "unusual mixture – or collision? – between theory-driven enquiry and a methodology which both requires and sustains involvement, personal disclosure, exchange, trust and the building of relationships" (p. 133).

Throughout most of the western world, to varying degrees, what is happening to teachers’ work reflects a kind of "educational asset stripping" (Cohen, 1998) – it is occurring under the
reform and re-structuring guise of labels like the devolved, site-based, or self-managing school. But, what these reforms amount to is a kind of economic self-mutilation as schools lacerate themselves fiscally, as the state retreats from its fiscal responsibility to adequately fund public education. These changes have also brought with them "shifting identities" (Roberts, 2000) in terms of what it means to be a teacher. Increasingly, we are having scenarios constructed that move us closer to the specter of quantifying what it means to be a teacher, or as Luke & Luke (2001) label it, "calculating the teacher". The undisclosed agenda seems to be the creation of what some approvingly regard as "a straightforward model of teacher education, which in turn would produce the so-called 'standard teacher'" (Roberts, 2000, p. 185). But in the face of these dramatic changes teacher professional identity, or "what it means for an individual to be socialised into a community of practice", is being significantly damaged.

Schools and teaching, according to Luke & Luke (2001) are being subjected to what Foucault called a new kind of "governmentality", one that has a number of well documented features:

- **Cultures of performativity**: That is, accountability for state and corporate expenditure is reported via multi-level performance feedback systems using simplified assessment data "performance indicators"); adjudication is performed through discourses of "quality assurance".

- **Steering from a distance**: That is, regulative, labor-intensive bureaucracies yield to 'lean' local management structures with accountability to the 'centre' established through data-driven surveillance, as above.

- **Output-based funding**: That is, increasingly scarce public funding is provided not on the basis of traditional input measures (e.g., student numbers, community demography and geography, staffing entitlements, institutional profile and mission) but through quantifiable outcomes (e.g., test scores, graduates, exit-survey data, client satisfaction).


There can be little doubt that if we take the long view, that teachers’ lives are being corroded by the current neo-liberal reform agenda – but the really crucial question is: what then, in a strategic sense, is to be done about it?

**The Antidote to 'Being Done To'**

Given the extent and the depth of the damage to teachers’ professional identities, the task is one that requires reconstructing and re-juvenating the work of teaching beyond the bandaidding that currently passes as impoverished political will and imagination. We need instead to pursue some big ideas that lie at the heart of what Bernstein (1996) refers to as the "pedagogic pallet" (p. 70) – a kind of mix of discursive and pedagogic possibilities that reconfigure who, how and what is to be constructed and controlled around teachers’ identity.

The Teachers’ Learning Project I have been involved in since 1996 in four primary and eight secondary schools in Australia, has attempted this turn-around through a series of extended case studies (and a series of associated research monographs called the *Investigation Series*) that have constituted a "multi-sited ethnography" (Marcus, 1998).
In entering into the lives of teachers we were looking for both "understanding" and "explanation", in which as Burawoy et al (1991) put it:

Understanding is achieved by virtual or actual participation in social situations, through the real or constructed dialogue between participant and observer, or what we call the hermeneutic dimension of social science. Explanation, on the other hand, is the achievement of an observer or outsider and concerns the dialogue between theory and data . . . (p. 3).

In the sense that ethnography is seamless or "unbound", what we doing as researchers amounted to trying to write ourselves into the world of the teachers' lives we were studying, rather than out of them. In Burawoy’s (1992) terms, in pursuing teachers' self-understandings, we were neither trying to strip ourselves of our "biases" nor "distance" ourselves as former teachers. We were adopting a situation "neither of distance nor immersion but [rather of] dialogue" (p. 4) with them. We found ourselves increasingly tangling with forces that had all manner of "connections and imaginations in a postmodern world" (Burawoy, et. al., 2000).

We realised that we could only understand and explain what was happening to teachers' work if we simultaneously examined the wider external forces that in C.W. Mills (1959) terms were connecting "the personal troubles of the milieu . . . [to] the public issues of social structure" (p. 14). Behind our attempt, therefore, was the desire to both show the failure of existing theory about teachers' work (without rejecting it outright), while at the same time acting as researchers to try to re-build that theory by reference to the wider sets of social forces operating to shape a critical theory of teachers' work.

In the eight ethnographic Case Studies and eight Investigation Series monographs that investigated ways of enhancing teachers' learning, there are some generative themes indicative of the wider aspects of "interactive trouble" (Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995) that amount to some significant cultural mismatches/misreadings or breakdowns in communication between, in this instance, what society thinks and understands schools to be for, and the ways in which schools and teachers interpret their role.

Our starting point in accessing teachers' lives in the Teachers' Learning Project was the open-ended question: "tell us about forms of teacher-owned and teacher-managed learning going on in your school, and tell us how it connects to student learning". This gave teachers a wide scope with which to begin to dialogue with us, and for us to move around within that conversation.

We found that officially imposed or externally mandated school reforms were being used as a kind of "organising device" (Maclure, 1993, p. 314) to contain teachers and shape them in particular ways. As I have indicated elsewhere there is an emerging cameo of the "preferred teacher" that goes 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 and where the teacher is hired and dispensed with as demand and fashion dictates. This ethos of schools as marketplaces also 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 incorporate 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 themselves manage others – there will be clear line management arrangements with each layer providing appropriate performance indicator information to the level above 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 (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, pp. 122-123).

But even within this officially preferred view of the teacher there were dilemmas, contradictions and contestations. In addition to what policy makers wanted there seemed to be what Convery (1999) labelled a "preferred identity" as well among teachers – a situation of "inner integrity [that] has demonstrably triumphed over adversity" (p. 135) as teachers maintained "a principled and sensitive self, struggling against oppositional forces" (p. 135).

We became increasingly aware of what Halpin, Moore and colleagues labelled "eclecticism and pragmatism in teacher identities" (Moore & Edwards, 2000), as teachers attached importance to what Coldron & Smith (1999) call active location in "social space". In other words, the array of possible relations teachers have to one another, and how "policies that impose greater degrees of uniformity and conformity threaten to impoverish the notion of active location" (p. 711).

The further we went with our conversational research with teachers the more we uncovered an increasingly "spoiled identity" (Goffman, 1963) for teachers. But we also found some extremely powerful "counternarratives" (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren & Peters, 1996) that were embedded in the "daily meaning" (Neilsen, 1999) teachers attach to teaching, or what de Certeau (1984) called "the oppositional practices of everyday life". These were the spaces and places where teachers speak about the nature of their work and the cultures of teaching and learning.

Some of the Pieces of the Puzzle: the Centrality of Teacher Learning

A point that repeatedly emerged from the ethnographic case studies, and that came out in the Investigation Series monographs was that teachers were not only crucial and necessary actors in school reform, but as Moore (2001) noted, teachers are:

. . . perfectly able and happy to deal with complex educational theory and relate this to practice. . . [with the important proviso, satisfied by this set of materials, that] the resources are perfectly pitched, showing busy teachers, in ways that avoid being patronizing or overly demanding, how they can use
existing theory to support, develop and interrogate their own school-based investigations (p. 270).

What was not being heard or picked up by policy makers, is that teachers are "central to school reform efforts" (Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999, p. 2). What was indispensable for teachers was "a sense of inquiry and critical reflection" (p. 19) that took the form of "thinking critically and acting politically" (p. 3) – a positioning that became even more imperative "in times of excessive external constraint" (Moore, 2001, p. 271).

There was compelling, though not surprising, evidence of a strong nexus between high teacher morale, the school as the prime site of professional learning, a culture of innovation and debate around teaching and learning at the level of the school, and improved learning outcomes for students. But, teachers indicated that this grassroots emphasis on school reform (Goodman, 1994) was not a satisfactory substitute for diminished responsibility on the part of the education system to provide leadership, sponsor debate, and provide funding necessary to maintain professional development programs across schools and with the wider educational community.

What emerged was that teachers did indeed have a tentative social theory of their learning.

In trying to engage in "imagining the whole" (Marcus, 1998) of what constituted teacher learning in these difficult times, there were four inter-related features (see Figure 1) that kept self-consciously (re)presenting themselves:

- Whole School Approach to Reform
- Distributive Leadership
- Dialogic Space
- Teaching as a Social Practice.

Each of these amounted to important theoretical and practical shuttles that kept us moving back and forth between our reading of the existing theory of teacher education and the accounts of their lives these teachers were sharing with us (see Smyth et al, 2000, pp. 58-59 for a more detailed account of what this dialectical theory-building looked like). In Burawoy
(2000) et al.,’s terms, we were embedded in creating an "extension of theory". In other words:

Rather than being ‘inducted’ from the data, discovered ‘de novo’ from the ground, existing theory is extended to accommodate observed lacunae or anomalies. We try to constitute the field as a challenge to some theory we want to improve (p. 28).

Whole School Reform: meant that unless teacher professional development was kept alive in the wider imagination of the school, then it would quickly collapse to a personal (and invisible) private responsibility for teachers to do in their ‘own time’ and at their own expense. There needed to be an active process of presenting school reform as something everyone in the school at large had a stake in shaping. Unless this occurred, then it became the responsibility and prerogative of a few, and was likely be unconnected to the wider process of school change.

Distributive Leadership: in schools where teacher learning remained alive there seemed to be an understanding that expertise did not necessarily inhere in high office, status or position (although that might happen on some occasions). Rather, leadership was much more democratic and revolved around the question: "who is capable of exercising expertise and carrying others along on this issue?"

Dialogic Space: there seemed to be an unspoken warrant in these schools that the school could not renew itself unless it had both space and place around which all teachers could collaborate on prioritising, planning and talking together about the joint work of teaching.

Teaching as a Social Practice: schools where there was an active culture of debate around teaching and learning appeared to thrive on creating circumstances in which everyone, including students, felt they were able to speak and have their aspirations listened to and taken seriously. In these schools, teaching was considered to be relational work, in which ‘what works’ was arrived at as a consequence of complex negotiations of open-ended difference, in contrast to imposing one-size-fits-all authoritarian ‘standards’. This became most immediately apparent at the level of the "the curriculum-as-realised in the classroom". Relationships were at the centre of everything that went on inside these schools.

One of the enduring paradoxes throughout the period of research into these schools was the way they existed in an educational context where systemic support for teachers’ learning has increasingly been whittled away in the ‘devolved school’, with professional development and teacher learning being wrapped up and buried in global budgets and flicked over to schools to decide if this was to be a priority. It had to jostle with all of the other priorities for space. Yet at the same time, teacher learning was also something that in and of itself was pre-disposed to being somewhat invisible because of its informal nature, occurring "on the job . . . in short bursts . . . [and] focussed on immediate needs" (McInerney, Hattam, Lawson & Smyth, 2000, p. 32). To that extent, the more it was allowed to be informal, the more teacher learning was not “factored into many professional development budgets" (p. 32), and the more it occurred "incidentally, without status afforded more formal professional development" (p. 32). On the other hand, it seemed that teachers were saying that the informality was what made it so efficacious, because it had relevance to their everyday practice. So, the struggle was one over visibility versus applicability, in which the greater the degree of informality, the greater the likelihood that it could slip off (or be pushed off) the school’s radar screen, unless something were done to prevent this.

It seemed that schools that had elevated teacher learning to a high priority were ones that had worked out that having a culture of debate around teacher learning was tantamount to
having a school that was not 'stuck'. In other words, they could see the importance of being able to actively keep dialogue alive in the school by leveraging space for dialogue, which often meant securing external funding through project grant applications so as not to leave teacher learning to chance, but connecting it to the larger mission the school was working on.

Another crucial dimension seemed to be that schools where teachers’ learning was alive, were places that were heavily into celebrating and elevating the importance of the local expertise they possessed. Part of this was about sustaining a vibrant culture around discussion, but in a way in which teachers were open to ideas from outside, but not captivated by them or entirely dependent upon such ideas. Perhaps this was because ideas developed at increasing distances from classrooms, teaching and learning were often regarded by teachers as being opportunistic at best, or whimsical at worst. People distant from the school were seen as lacking credibility and having an inability to understand the complexity of local circumstances. In these schools there was a lot of emphasis on the pursuit of 'indigenous' (or local) solutions and structures to problems, but in an overall context of examining the influence of the broader parameters of how circumstances were being shaped globally, systemically and institutionally, as well as across the school-community boundary. This meant crafting more inclusive forms of professional development in which everyone in the school felt they could make an authentic contribution. Often this amounted to teachers modelling with each other and with parents, the kind of collaborative learning they wanted their students to enact with one another.

Putting our particular spin on this, what these teachers were doing was engaging in critical reflection (Smyth, McInerney, Hattam & Lawson, 1999): "providing suggestions and structures for gathering evidence, for discussing practice, and for interrogating the status quo "(Moore, 2001, p. 271). The teachers were actively contesting the tendency to construe their work in purely technical terms, and to see it instead as having crucial moral, political and socially just dimensions, especially in contexts where many of the students came from backgrounds of economic disadvantage. These were schools where teachers were prepared to "rattle complacent cages", pursue a "pedagogy of discomfort" and push up against "threats of conformism" (Boler, 1999, p. 175) through seeking to foster a "culture of dissent" (Lem, 1999) in the school.

It is important to also make the rather salutary point that these were "not utopian learning communities" (McInerney, Hattam, Lawson & Smyth, 2000, p. 33) either. They were schools where teachers had to struggle daily with realities of intensification of their work, mandated curriculum, the push for standards, and system-wide accountability measures – but they seemed able to find ways through this miasma in which they worked out which (if any) of these outside initiatives could be made to work for their schools, or what adaptations might need to be made. The starting point was often some kind of ‘audit’ or reconnaissance of what was already occurring in order to get a fix on what was happening, and therefore, what needed to be done.

**Making a ‘Soft Revolution’**

Although we didn’t use this kind of language at the time, it seems with the benefit of some hindsight that the schools we were looking into were pursuing what Postman & Weingartner (1971) called a "soft revolution"— a process of renewal and reconstruction without violence – meaning, they were not engaging in damaging or destructive activities, despite the fact that "schools are still murdering almost everybody, intellectually and spiritually . . in the absence of [any] decent ‘game plan’ to stop them" (p. 6). To paraphrase what I understand Postman & Weingartner (1971) mean by this ‘soft revolution’:
The soft revolution is characterised by a minimum of rhetoric, dogma and charismatic leadership (p. 4) . . . The central purpose . . . is to help all of us to get it all together in the interests of *mutual* survival (p. 4) . . . When you are making a soft revolution, you need not concern yourself with every problem of the universe. Only one or two. (p. 4) . . .

When you are making a soft revolution, you do not always need a large organisation. Sometimes, five people doing the right thing the right way can do the job (p. 5). . . [and] The basic metaphor of the soft revolution is judo . . . When you are using judo, you do not oppose the strength of your adversary. You use your adversary’s strength against himself, and inspite of himself (in fact, *because* of himself) (p. 5).

Rather than confrontational tactics that wastefully expend energy and end up being hopelessly inefficient, the game plan of the teachers in the schools we observed, seemed to be to use the features of the education system to work for changes that benefitted themselves, their students and communities. In Postman & Weingartner’s terms, these teachers seemed to have found a way of developing an understanding of the structures, symbols and psychology of how to inhabit and utilise the spaces available, to best effect.

The overwhelming feature characterising these schools, without over-romanticising them, was their demonstrable capacity to be able to locate and exploit the points of overlap between the rhetoric and practices of the system, and teachers’ own pedagogic skills and judgement. For instance:

- the system is on about ‘learning outcomes’; most teachers have a strong commitment to developing the kind of productive relationships within which all students can learn;

- the system continually emphasizes ‘quality and continuous improvement’; most teachers enjoy working in a culture of innovation and have sophisticated ways of going about re-culturing, re-structuring and placing teaching and learning at the centre of their work;

- the system demands accountability even when this means as Shore & Wright (2000) note, an undeclared policy “to keep systems volatile, slippery and opaque” (p. 569) ; and teachers have their own robust ways of defining what accountability means in the context of their teaching;

- the system argues the need for a ‘rigorous curriculum’; teachers are continually looking for and working in spaces with other teachers to plan and teach a socially just curriculum inclusive of all students;

- the system mouthes the rhetoric of ‘student voice’; but, very large numbers of teachers know that good schooling is only possible when students meaningfully participate in democratic school decision making;

- the system is at pains to ensure the prominence of ‘visioning; having a clear purpose and direction around which teacher learning occurs is a central aspect of the way many schools operate;

- the system continually argues the virtues of ‘school-community partnerships’; many teachers have very insightful ways of meaningfully engaging parents in dialogue across the school-community boundary; and
• the system preaches the virtues of strong and decisive leadership; some schools have worked out how to have highly workable forms of distributive leadership.

One of the most pervasive features of the case study schools was the way they were succeeding ‘against the odds’. They were places characterised by complexity, in terms of multiple forms of disadvantage – poverty, de-industrialisation, racism, harassment, and damaged communities. Yet, notwithstanding, there seemed to be a prevailing view that regarded what went on in these schools as having to be oriented towards practices that included the most disadvantaged. What seemed to sustain these schools was a consistent and patterned capacity to pursue progressive school-wide visions and aspirations that were anchored in the schools themselves, around, for example: socially just curriculum; innovative middle schooling strategies for young adolescents; school-community dialogue; student voice in school decision making; gender inclusive approaches for girls; and, a rigorous curriculum for indigenous students.

A certain amount of courage was required in pursuing these ideals because they were not characteristics that often featured highly or received resounding acclamation in terms of what was ‘officially’ valued by the education system in its pursuit of the marketised and competitive school. In many respects these schools were, therefore, working on ‘underdog issues’ and running strongly against the prevailing tide. They were places that had worked out what was worthwhile doing, and had created their own support structures to enable them to do this. For example, in many instances these schools had created the features of what we called the ‘dialogic school’ – which is to say, they were places where there was lots of talk within the context of teaching, focussing on what worked, why, with what effect, and what needed to be changed if things were not working.

Conclusion

A way of putting some closure around this issue is to say that the reclamation of teachers’ work resides in pursuing the ideal of the ‘dialogic’ school – one that broadly has an agenda around issues of teacher education, that include the following.

A culture of innovation and experimentation needed to be sustained around teaching and learning that did not allow the school and its teachers to atrophy. Practically speaking this meant joint planning by teachers of teaching, curriculum and assessment. Good ideas were shared and available to everyone, even though such sharing was always highly provisional in the sense of being subjected to trial by other teachers before being added to their repertoire. Teaching teams, rather than isolated and insulted individuals operating in scripted and didactic ways, was the clearly preferred norm.

Considerable energy and effort was expended in being attentive to the complex and diverse ways in which students learn. This was reflected too in the way the school approached its assessment and reporting of student progress. In these matters, there was no ‘one-size-fits-all’ method likely to work. All stakeholders, including the students, were involved on crafting ‘solutions’ to problems.

Above all there were concerted attempts at ‘bottom-up’ experimentation in which there was continual interrogation and critical reflection upon subject matter, teaching content, student lives, professional teaching relationships, pedagogic assumptions and practices. These were construed not as isolated technical matters, but rather as being intimately connected to the school, society and students’ lives, and were reflected in the approach taken to curriculum.
Students thus became active curriculum makers in their own learning in schools that prided themselves in having a quite sophisticated understanding of how they were continually engaging in the process of ‘constructing’ young lives.

References


