

# **Towards a theory of the devolved teacher**

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### *ABSTRACT*

There has been a shift in these new times towards understanding the politics of teachers' work in terms of a productive theory of power. Simply put, in the case of schools and teachers, the state implements its policy imperatives through getting at the soul of teachers. Teachers, like their students, are involved in identity work, in and around the prevailing policy discourses. In this paper I want to ponder how teachers engage in identity work around what it means to be a 'good teacher'. Given that local school management is the only game in town, then teachers have little choice but to construct themselves as the devolved teacher. But as this paper outlines, the devolved teacher is multiple and historical, and finds ways to work with and against the tendency of contemporary policy that implicitly aims at dumbing-down the profession, enforcing compliance, and bifurcating the ethical questions from practice.

### Introduction

This paper ponders the possibilities for ethico-political practice by teachers in a policy context that is especially marked by the move towards devolution or 'local school management'. I want to join in on the conversation that might be understood as a policy ethnography or policy sociology of teachers' work.

There are a number of inter-related reasons why this problem is important at this time. Firstly, in policy terms, it is essential that we examine the rhetorical claims being made about the policies that are advancing local school management. Given that the most recent variation of policies have been designed and implemented with very little research basis-we can at least map the damage and provide a critique that has practical intent-that is offers a language of possibility in the form of a socially-critical policy alternative. Drawing on Geras [, 1998 #817], this involves facing 'up to things unpleasant in the hope of finding an answer to them if there is one; of seeking, or prompting, some opposed or mitigating line of persuasion' (p 1). Second, in terms of the practical concerns of teachers, its essential that we examine the limits of the present policy context with a view to thinking how we might transgress these. Teachers need a theory of resistance-that I'm calling 'practices of freedom' [Foucault, 1988c #248: 3][Freire, 1972 #72]-that offers spaces for practices that can transgress ..And third, this problem provides another opportunity to work on a significant theoretical issue for those of us committed to a critical theory of teachers' work, namely how to think past a theory of over-determination without agency or

We need to avoid turning own heads and develop a more palatable narrative to prevent freaking ourselves out or upsetting others?

In the first instance I am considering 'local school management' as code for the policy trajectory for public schools over most of the past thirty years. The term directs our attention to the changing nature of the relationship between the educational bureaucracy (that mediates what the state is up to) and schools. The South Australian variation has most recently been defined as:

School based management features the decentralisation of decision-making authority to centres where student learning occurs. The aim of such decentralisation is to give student learning centres constituents-principals, teachers, parents and other community members more control over what happens in them in order to enhance the performance and the quality of education provided to students. This is based on the assumption that decisions made closer to the site of learning are expected to better meet the needs of students because they involve people who are in a better position to have the information and resources to make those decisions (Cox 2002: 133).

Simply put, the term infers a view that decision making in schools should be made at the local level. As well, 'local school management' is code for all manner of criticism for educational bureaucracy. The term sets up an opposition between schools and the centre in which all that's good is happening in schools and all that's bad is because of bureaucracy. So the story goes, to improve educational provision all we have to do is get bureaucracy out of the way and let schools get on with it. And of course this 'common sense' has some truth to it. The term local school management though has a number of problems for any analysis of this changing relationship and in this book we prefer to refer to devolution instead. The term local school management is a recent category that focuses attention towards the school. The term infers all of the action is actually at the school level and diverts our attention away from the 'centre' or what the state is up to. In this sense, the term hides or misrepresents half of the story.

#### The methodology

This paper reports on recent ethnographic research into the impact of devolution on teachers' work. We spent time with teachers in three very different public schools in South Australia and also interviewed a range of other teachers, union officials and school principals.

The data for this paper has come from a series of purposeful conversations with teachers from one of those schools which is a large metropolitan High School. The school recently began to confront the inertia of a quite traditional school culture-one that has emphasised didactic teaching and aping the cultural elitism of the wealthy private schools. There has been an attempt to argue that the competitive academic curriculum, (Connell ) does not work as well for all students. There has been some school-based research that has focused on the year 10 students which revealed that there wasn't much choice in the curriculum, that they were 'old enough to voice their concerns' and they were young adults being treated like kids. As well, the students voiced their concerns about year 10 being a lost year, that lots of the teaching was poor and it didn't prepare them well for the rigors of year 11. As well, the traditional culture of the school now finds itself in tension with recent policies on devolution, including the push for school-based professional development, and also with the changing composition of its community. The school has attempted to provide spaces for teachers to examine the complexity of this issue by establishing self-managing teams at the Year 10 level. Teachers volunteered to participate in these teams, which were provided with some resources to release teachers. Each team had a convenor and developed their own goals and timeline. The focus for each team was their own problematising of some facet of teaching and learning rather than the need to implement the top-down changes promoted by the Department. Having said that the Department did provide resources for these types of initiatives if the school was sufficiently entrepreneurial enough.

In this symposium we want to shuttle between some of our theoretical problems and our account of what's going on. In making sense of the reality of teachers' work that is now that have confronted us, such as, how to theorise the subjectivity of the teacher in a context in which subjectivity is the arena in which power is working

In developing an account of what's going on in schools and especially what's happening to teachers' work, we struggle with the following:

- how is power working on teachers
- what conceptual resources can we use to theorise the subjectivity of teachers

Even though the 'conceptual status of the state itself [is] increasingly thrown into doubt' (McCarthy & Dimitriadis 2000: 170) we can at least attempt to map some trends and think about the notion of governmentality as it applies to teachers' work.

### **Governing in times of ungovernability**

In the first instance, the move towards a policy of the self-managing schools can to be understood in the context of the crisis of the welfare state. As [Kivinen, 1998 #1091] argues, the welfare state 'takes on the classical features of a tragic hero, and becomes the victim of its own success, expected to take on responsibilities and to arouse expectations which it is incapable of fulfilling' (p. 39).

Since 1968, the post world war 2 liberal democratic settlement that congealed as the welfare state, has been suffering from economic, social and environmental crises. Borrowing from Giddens [, 1994 #113], under 'conditions of intensifying globalization and social reflexivity' (p. 149) the nation-state loses its ability to 'provide effective central control of economic life' (p. 140). Under such conditions, structural unemployment becomes a permanent feature, as does the emergence of an underclass which suffers welfare dependency; both strain policies of economic redistribution. The welfare state can cushion, but not entirely eliminate the undesirable consequences of capitalist economic growth. As well, the welfare state finds it increasingly difficult to manage/govern under conditions in which the risks arise from the maturation of our modern institutions. The Enlightenment's prescription of more knowledge and more control is no longer adequate to deal with the manufactured uncertainties of intensifying globalization, the destabilization of traditions and the expansion of social reflexivity. Of course the diagnosis of the crisis of the welfare state is highly contested but having said that, post-1968 might be characterised by a discontent from both the left and the right, that 'it can't go on like this'. The nation state in the form of the welfare-state seems to have reached the limits of its capacities and is now 'enfeebled and overburdened' [Habermas, 1999 #1092: 46]. Offe (1987 refers to this condition as ungovernability. As well, both left and right theorists of the state agreed with 'the Marxist thesis that bourgeois democracy and the capitalist mode of production stand in a precarious and immanently indissoluble relation of tension to each other' (p. 68). For those on the left, it is axiomatic that the source of the crisis is the 'expansionary, competitive and exploitative logic of capitalist accumulation' . For the right, the crisis is 'in the institutionalized arrangements of the welfare-state mass democracy' .

With the emergence of a deepening crisis for the welfare state and having survived the student rebellion of 1968, capital went on the offensive, especially in France and the US [Offe, 1987 #792] and its neoliberal ideology gained the political ascendancy for much of the past twenty years. Given that, we need to understand the way that neoliberal ideology

diagnose the problem of ungovernability of the welfare state and what therapies it proposes. (As an aside: the neoliberals use this medical-biological model themselves which 'has the effect of modeling the structural problems of society on the patient-doctor relationship' (p. 69)).

For neo-liberals, the state is in immediate danger of a chronic or even acute failure, and this danger arises out of two inter-related conditions: firstly the state is exposed to a 'growing burden of expectations, obligations, and responsibilities', 'which it cannot escape' (p. 69); and, secondly a diagnosis of why it can't escape: 'the steering capacities of the state apparatus are in principle too limited to be able to process effectively the burden of these demands and expectation' (p. 69). For the neoliberal, the 'expectation overload' (p. 69) is really 'an overstressing of claims to welfare-state services and democratic participation' (p. 69) which derive from inappropriate politicisation of everyday life by 'the unbridled and mindless consciousness of citizens' (p. 69). On the other hand, the state's steering capacity is severely limited because the economic and political guarantees of freedom that are in place are responsible for tying the hands of state power. Offe argues that this apparent ungovernability is experienced as frustration and a noticeable loss of confidence in the party political process. As a consequence, political will formation is damaged. In the process of obtaining, 'freely' the consent of the majority of people, political parties invariably propose a platform that it cannot fulfil, whilst those aspects it denounces during the election process it puts into operation. The accumulated disappointments then unleash a dynamic in which the ungovernability already diagnosed actually intensifies. For neoliberal theory, such a dynamic, sets up the conditions for extensive breakdowns and even disintegration of organized state power some time in the near future.

Prevention of such breakdowns requires a therapy related to the two components of the diagnosis. 'Either it can aim at diminishing the overloading of the system with claims, expectations, and responsibilities, or it can attempt to enhance its steering and performance capacity' (p. 71). Offe takes each of these in turn.

In regards to claim reduction, he outlines three forms of implementation. This part of his analysis draws on Luhmann's work on developing a systems theory of the state. Broadly speaking, systems theory analyses late capitalist systems as comprising three subsystems: the political, the capitalist economy, and the legitimation subsystem. There are obvious parallels here to thinking about societies in terms of politics, the economy, and culture. Systems theory is justified on the grounds that late capitalist societies differ from any earlier form of capitalism, and especially that anarchic liberal version considered by Marx. Instead late capitalism is characterised by a 'complex and integrated coherence between different subsystems, and is something consciously pursued by agents within the system'. And of central importance for systems theory is the 'capacity of state power to regulate and integrate discrepancies and conflicts' (p. 257). Offe refers to Luhmann's assumptions about four key sites through which social claims and expectations can be processed. These are: '(1) political power relations, (2) monetary, exchange, and market relations, (3) cultural norms or socialization relations, and (4) the medium of truth and knowledge'. According to the neoliberal view, the appropriate therapy is to unburden the political medium by shifting the expectation overload onto the other three sites. This form of therapy now characterises the neoliberal state and its policy interventions into the field of education.

Perhaps the most obvious therapy for the crisis, as understood by the neoliberal state, has been the redirection of expectations onto the market. The last decade or so has seen governments embark on a project that entails privatisation and deregulation of public infrastructure and services including health and education. Where complete privatisation is impossible, marketisation strategies are implemented, in which public services are opened to the logic of the market at least, either aping the market logic or else opening up the

service to partnerships with market players. Schooling is a prime example of this strategy. Public schools are being forced to compete as stand alone sites in an education market place in which they have to tout for business using advertising tools prepared by the state in the form of basic skills tests and client satisfaction surveys, not unlike those used by the pollsters to gauge public opinion.

In shifting expectations onto the market, neoliberal policy assumes that the market is the solution to all problems. The policy imperative is to 'reestablish a functioning market mechanism' (p. 71), or a 'restoration of the mechanisms of competition' (p. 72). Strengthening the market mechanisms also means dismantling mechanisms of welfare-state security, as well as the political and economic power positions occupied by trade unions in their struggle to establish and defend these mechanisms.

The second aspect of reducing claims on government, and which goes deeper than the first, involves taking over those 'institutions that regulate the formation and preservation of social norms as well as cultural and political value orientations' (p. 72). Apple refers to this as the 'politics of common sense' (p 15). On this point Apple rejects a somewhat over-determined view of ideology, that argues that 'the common sense of people becomes common sense 'naturally' as they go about their daily lives, lives that are prestructured by their class position' (p. 15). Instead, and borrowing from Hall, he argues that common sense actually has to win ascendancy (rather than being ascribed it) through a specific and contingent (in the sense of open-ended, not totally determined) process of ideological struggle. Apple alludes to the ideological struggles going on around what it means to be a good teacher and the purpose of education. Offe also highlights other sites of ideological struggle, including vocational training and broadcast freedom. In this sense, neoliberal politics is pedagogical: 'deviant interests, claims, and sociopolitical orientations are to be brought under control at their point of origin' (p. 72).

And the third approach involves 'those claims and demands that can neither be prevented at their source nor shunted into other domains can be throttled in terms of their impact on the political-administrative system through the instillation of filter mechanisms that would decide which of the claims merit being heard' (p. 73). In Luhmann's terms this refers to the social medium of truth and knowledge, and refers to those sites or institutions that render cognitive judgements and have 'authority that stands above parties ...and claims privileged access to knowledge of the common good' (p. 73). We could point to the World Bank, IMF and the OECD, as well as the highest courts in each of our respective countries. We can see the way that the OECD attempts to drive educational policy development.

The second dimension of the neoliberal ungovernability thesis is the need to increase the state's steering capacity. Offe distinguishes between an administrative and a political version. The administrative strategy is about increasing 'the state's share of the gross national product. It seeks to expand quantitatively and fiscally the elbow room the state has at its disposal' (p. 73). As well, the state seeks to improve its regulatory capacity through expanding its horizon for conceptualizing and acting. Such expansion of horizons of action are only possible though if the political-administrative system can absorb conflict. Such expansion in the end requires a consolidation of consensus or an 'institutionalization of alliances and consultative mechanisms among government, trade unions, employee associations, organizations or managerial personnel, and even consumer groups' (p. 74). The idea that the state is withering under neoliberal policy is being refuted here. The state is not so much withdrawing but redefining its interventions. New areas are penetrated while others are deregulated and transferred to the market.

According to the neoliberal ungovernability thesis, freedom itself is redefined in market terms: its the freedom to choose, and hence democracy is seen as a limit to freedom.

Democracy then must be curtailed. The market must be invulnerable to democratic power. But this strategy is not as simple as 'get the state off our backs'. For neoliberals, the state needs to work on behalf of the market. The state is expected to provide expenditures that are directly of benefit to business through the provision of continuous protection and services, government financing, the construction of transport infrastructure, and free training for human resources. As well, the state is expected to undermine the decades of social struggles that have established safety standards and environmental regulations; the right to organise in workers' unions; health care for everyone independent of their ability to pay; universal, free and high quality public education; subsidised university education; and a public transport system.

### The cultural production of teacher subjectivity

In this study we see schools as sites for the cultural production of teachers' 'subjectivities'. This assumption is a bit of a mouth-full and needs some unpacking before we proceed.

Cultural production refers to the process in which 'subjectivities' are 'created' or (re)produced with and against the implementation of education policy. This term cultural production has come to carry the complex critiques of economic, social and cultural reproduction theory that moved critical educational theory on from the 'new sociology of education' [Wexler, 1987 #239]. For the benefit of my argument we will rehearse some of these critiques here. Firstly, reproduction theory takes a rather over-determined view of ideology-that subjects are interpellated by ideology and hence without agency. When translated to teachers' work, reproduction theory takes an over-determined view of policy and hence obliterates the possibility of any agency for teachers. Teachers become mere cyphers or dupes for policy. Such a theory might even be thought to be without human consciousness or subjectivity and hence can not think about the possibility of contestation or the way that teachers actively confront the ideological and material conditions of their work. On the other hand, the term 'cultural production' works as a theoretical construct that allows us to interpret the way that teachers creatively occupy schools. Teachers are not passive and malleable in the light of policy pronouncements, but are 'social agents' [Willis, 1977 #1110: 175], who engage in a range of tactics including accommodation and refusal. And 'cultural production' as a theoretical construct demands that we think in broader terms about the sorts of cultural politics teachers are engaged in as social agents. Which brings us to the second aspect of critique that I want to mention here. The term cultural reproduction infers a social process which is independent of, but also in complex relation with, processes of social and cultural reproduction of class structures. Not only are teachers dynamically involved in the way in which schools reproduce class but the term 'culture' here invokes also differences of gender, race and sexuality. This demands replacing a view of culture as a 'static, unchanging body of knowledge "transmitted" between generations' [Levinson, 1996 #843: 13] and one that privileges struggles constituted around class. Instead, we are arguing for a much more expansive view of culture 'as a continual process of creating meaning in social and material contexts' (p. 13) and hence is continually produced as well as reproduced. The distinction between production and reproduction is vital here. As a production there is space for contestation, contradiction, ambiguity and agency. As well, such a view of culture implies a more complex view of meaning making than just making sense of the economic aspects of our lives. If the present is understood by the phenomena of globalisation then a reconceptualisation of the term culture needs to take into account not just the expansion of transnational capitalism, but also, the impact of the bureaucratic state, media culture and the creation of new nationalisms and ethnic identities, and also the politics of new social movements. And thirdly, the term cultural production most often refers to the 'process by which new texts, new cultural artifacts and commodities such as art, music and video, are

created' (p. 13). But recently there has been a move away from studying 'culture' as only analysis of cultural commodities to one of a study of lived culture. That the everyday is also a cultural production [Certeau, 1984 #785]. We can point to important ethnographic work in schools [Wexler, 1992 #375][Weis, 1990 #231] that aims to study the everyday life of students and especially the way in which their identities or subjectivities are constructed with and against the dominant ideology of schools. Such studies attempt to show how student identities/subjectivities are a kind of 'cultural production which responds to, and simultaneously constitutes, movements, structures, and discourses beyond the school' [Levinson, 1996 #843: 12]. The concept subjectivity/identity in this case represents the experience of being a person as a dynamic never-ending process and not an 'already accomplished fact' [Hall, 1990 #606: 222]. Subjectivity is socially constructed, as a production, which is never complete and always in process. Subjectivity in this case is always a matter of becoming.

Of course its easy to think that young people are involved in a process of becoming somebody but we think this analysis holds 'true' also for teachers. The subjectivities of teachers too are always in process, of becoming, of never being complete. And not being complete and autonomous but 'produced in a whole range of discursive practices - economic, political, social - the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power' [Weedon, 1987 #847: 21]. What is central to our analysis is that teacher subjectivities too are sites of a constant struggle over power.

What is of special interest in this paper is how we might consider the school as a site of the production of teachers' subjectivity or their 'pedagogical identity'. (or how is pedagogy a cultural production?).

But we need some clarity here around what we mean by 'subjectivity'.

In positioning ourselves in the rather complex and confusing debates about what it means to be a human being we want to draw on the work of Langman and Scantamburlo [, 1996 #848].

In the end this debate comes down to working out the sorts of conducive conditions that are required to develop pedagogies that work in a variety of widely different contexts. The idea of devolution only makes sense if the policy enables those working in schools to develop pedagogies that work for their students. Devolution only makes sense if the policies empower those working in schools to develop their own solutions to their educational problems. All of the ideological manouvering, all of the bluster, and unsubstantiated claims about the self-managing school will in the end be evaluated in terms of whether or not this 'reform' can deliver improved learning outcomes. At this stage there is little evidence that learning outcomes are being improved in those countries that have moved towards forms of self-managing school. Unfortunately also the contemporary debate about the self-managing school has been framed in terms of a blackmail: you've got to be either for or against 'self-managing schools'. You've got to be for or against 'local decision making'. You've got to be

for or against 'parent participation'. It is not whether you for or against local school management but in what form, and in whose interests. Such blackmail is really about silencing criticism and hence is a strategy that aims to undermine the democratizing spirit of local school decision-making. Not wanting to be blackmailed I want to argue in this paper for the ongoing devolution of decision-making to the local school level but not in the form of a model that aims to reassert hierarchical models of school leadership, that continues to leave teachers out of the policy development process, and one that has lost interest in the educational problems facing teachers in school, namely how to reinvent pedagogies that are appropriate for the existential issues facing our communities.

The model that is on offer, that hides behind the language of local school management, also has a double movement in terms of what it does to our attention. A part of this blackmail has been to keep 'the centre' out of view. In the first instance, it directs our attention to the school level and hides what the centre is up to. The term itself, local school management, only refers to the school. The centre is invisible, even though, the term itself is code for a model of the relationship between 'centre' and school. But the centre has not disappeared. Far from it. We think Offe's analysis offers a rebuke to the idea that local school management is about the withering of the state, or the simple minded idea that is promoted by advocates of local school management that what's required is getting the bureaucracy out of the way and let schools get on with it. It's not that the state has withered but changed its modus operandi.

And most importantly for this section, the state ('the centre') has retreated from the debate about what constitutes 'good pedagogy' and instead expected teachers to come up with 'pedagogy that works' by reforming the system using a logic of performativity. Performativity here refers to the metadiscourse that presently dominates in the development of public policy [Yeatman, 1994 #841] and hence also in education.

The term performativity here simply refers to a motivational ploy, (or "language game") that goes something like, 'you will get better because we're going to measure outputs'. At least that's the way the ploy gets relayed to teachers. Such a ploy is a large part of the strategy used by neoliberal governments to hedge their legitimation crisis. Of course, in education there has been a legitimation crisis for decades: the system just doesn't work for the majority of the population and is still very much is skewed towards wealthy families. As a means of defending the status quo, its necessary to sustain consent of the population at large.

Performativity as a form of reasoning elevates as its highest value the optimisation of the relationship between inputs and outputs, or efficiency. In fact to optimise 'rationality in the system, in a context of making an industrial society competitive, such a technocratic view is privileged.

When the detail of the model of self-management is examined in detail

What it means to improve learning outcomes is not that difficult a matter. Any historical reckoning of schooling since world war 2 can see a significant imperative at work in the rationale for reform. How can the education system work for all young people, and especially those living in families who are not wealthy. The advent of public schooling was a

Our argument revolves around the following:

1. Schools have had a degree of 'autonomy' for many years. Over the last thirty years 'the centre' has devolved responsibility for curriculum decision making around some broad parameters that have been defined in terms of 'common core' curriculum. 'Performance management', that was once disciplined through regular visits by Inspectors has been devolved to the Principal. Professional development that was once taken so seriously by the centre in the form of Advisory teachers, and properly funded centres has now been devolved almost entirely to schools. Prior to the recent policy moves towards what we are calling the self-managing school schools have been experimenting with possibilities And many have developed quite sophisticated whole school reform projects within the scope of existing relationships between 'the centre' and schools. Whole school reform here refers to taking some local level initiative to make a difference. Its important to stress that 'local school management' in its latest form is not the first schools have heard of devolved decision making. Most teachers have experienced their whole careers in schools in which 'local school management' has been a reality in some form or another.

#### Its relational

Our analysis is "grounded in the fact that education is a relationship between human beings. The point is, that education cannot and should not be reduced to a merely instrumental relationship, as this would ignore the personhood - or at least emerging personhood - of the child" [Biesta, 1998 #1161: 3].

... where the techniques of self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point, where individuals are driven by others is tied to the way in which they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think, government. Governing people ...is not a way to force people to do what a the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself [Foucault, 1993 #1090: 203-4].

Foucault is warning against thinking about the exercise of power as pure violence or strict coercion and in the spirit of Gramsci notion of hegemony wants us to contemplate the how of power in terms of a subtle integration of coercion technologies and self-technologies.

... in the way the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the

individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society, his social group [Foucault, 1988c #248: 11].

In conclusion, and returning to Foucault [, 1982c #854] for advice:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.

The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and form the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries (p. 216).

What I want to suggest, is that in some Australian high schools there is an alternative discourse, a tactical one if you like, that is spoken outside of the general strategy. In some cases, and for tactical reasons, this discourse actually speaks along with the neoliberal policy discourse, at other times it speaks back, but mostly this alternative is nurtured in spite of the trajectory of the general strategy.

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