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# What teaching does to teachers: The effects on teachers of the actions of the education system.

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## Abstract

This paper reports on findings from a PhD study entitled *Teacher identity and power in contexts of educational change: A case study of teachers* (2006). The focus of the paper relates to findings about what happens *with, for* and *to* teachers in contexts of change, with particular reference to the affects of the actions of the education system on teachers. The researcher interviewed eight teachers about issues related to how change affected them. A three tiered analysis process was utilised, employing a narrative approach, a grounded theory approach which arrived at three themes of *change, power* and *identity*, with their accompanying categories and sub-categories, and a discourse analytic approach using Gee's (1999) framework of 18 analytical questions. It utilised the notion of 'identity' as a tool for investigating teachers. The findings discussed here reveal the affects on teachers of the actions of the education system (in this case the Tasmanian state government education department). It highlights that teaching does something to teachers (Waller, 1932), and in this study, the actions of the education system and/or its agents, put the teachers at risk of eroding the sense of goodwill that has existed between teachers and the education system.

In 1932 Willard Waller published his major work *The Sociology of Teaching*. What caught my attention when I discovered this work was the section entitled ‘What teaching does to teachers’ (pp 375-440). Here, way back in 1932, was a researcher who clearly acknowledged that the tasks of teaching did something to the person doing the teaching. He stated:

“Teaching makes the teacher. ... Teaching does something to those who teach. Introspective teachers know of changes that have taken place in themselves. Objectively minded persons have observed the relentless march of growing teacherishness in others” (p.375).

Yet this finding – that teaching does something to those who teach – had been an identified aspect of my own teaching career and an understanding at which I had arrived during my own teaching journey, but most recently it had surfaced in my developing PhD research. From prior research study I had begun with the premise that a teacher who, under the authority of a given educational system, was expected to teach using a mandated literacy program, may experience a sense of tension and conflict if they were aware that no single literacy program could meet the needs of all the students in their care. How did a teacher experiencing this kind of conflict continue to maintain their professional integrity. How did they manage when there was a divergence between what they knew from their professional understandings about education and students’ needs and what they were required to do by their employer. This site of conflict was of interest to me. Background research and reading uncovered the Waller text, affirming that, while not a new phenomenon, the “impact of the occupation [on teachers]” ... “is a problem most untouched” (Waller, 1932 p.375) – well at least it was in 1932.

I began to seek some further information about how changes affected teachers themselves, not just their theoretical knowledge or teaching practice. More recent research appeared to focus on the intensification of teachers’ work, teachers and stress, teachers’ career paths and so on, but a paucity of information about how teachers maintain their sense of professional integrity in contexts where the education system requires them to teach in a particular program, style or focus that may be at odds with their own understandings about students’ needs. Surely an understanding about this is critical in managing and keeping teachers in the profession, introducing major educational reforms, developing career paths for teachers and generally keeping the teaching work force contented. Perhaps, though, this notion about

teacher's integrity and sense of professional self was not on the agenda for researchers because it was not deemed relevant. As both a teacher and researcher I was fascinated.

I was intrigued to know what happens *to*, *with* and *for* teachers when they are faced with a system of education that requires them to act in a particular way that is not necessarily aligned with their current educational understandings about what is best for their students or in some way in conflict with their teaching style. Change is inevitable in education: there are always new ways to do things, adjustments in curriculum, more up-to-date programs and terminologies and catch-phrases re-invent themselves on a regular basis. Those teachers who have been in the system for more than a decade had, it seemed to me, become adept at managing the plethora of changes and variations. This area of research though was not just about investigating how teachers felt about changes in curriculum, in teaching style or practices, or developments in teaching philosophies or pedagogy. It intended to go deeper than that. It was about the cornerstone of teaching, that is, teachers themselves. It was about whether teachers, who were required to behave or teach in a way that was, for them, against their intrinsic professional understandings, encountered some need to compromise their professional integrity. Such a compromise would have professional implications – for them and for the profession. But I needed some way to investigate teachers themselves – to get an insight into their professional integrity, their personal and professional dimensions. It was the concept of 'identity' that created this window for observation and investigation.

The research project continued to develop.

This concept of 'identity' was arrived at through a long process of reading and assessment. Parker J Palmer's work was instrumental in developing what was meant by the use of the term 'identity' in this research (Palmer, 1997, 1998). For this study, the notion of identity was conceptualised as being holistic and individually unique, comprised of a convergence of all the elements of life experiences, physical characteristics, personality, roles and background, genetic makeup, ethnicity and culture. It included a person's understandings, knowledge, beliefs, feelings and values. Identity was acknowledged as socially and relationally constructed, unique to each person and comprises an array of elements that continually form and reform as each person lives their life. It must be stated though that it was never an intention of this study to quantify, describe or arrive at an understanding about

each of the teachers' identities. As a researcher it was the effects and affects of change upon the teachers, with specific interest in the variations in expectations from the education system, which was of interest. The construct of 'identity' provided a mechanism through which to view these effects and affects.

This broad and holistic understanding of identity could provide a tool through which to investigate the deeper personal and professional implications of change on teachers. With this definition, the research was able to acknowledge that, for teachers, expectations about changes in education went beyond the superficial level of varying the teaching manner, tweaking the curriculum to incorporate a myriad of new areas that one is expected to teach or adjusting to new theories and terminologies about teaching. It allowed the researcher to see teachers as people who teach rather than mere deliverers of the curriculum. It added another dimension to the person-hood of the teacher that permitted an investigation into what the actions of the education department on teachers at the coal-face of education might be beyond alterations to teaching practice.

The study became a qualitative research project which employed a critical case study approach to examine the effects of change on teachers. Open-ended interviews were selected as the most appropriate mechanism to elicit information from teachers about their understandings of what was happening *with, to and for* them in educational change contexts. Change was selected as an entry point for conversations with teachers as it was, and remains, a topic of controversy in educational circles. Eight early childhood teachers provided the data – transcripts from a total of sixteen interviews of up to 90 minutes each – which are analysed using a three-tiered approach. The first level of analysis utilised a narrative approach, storying the interviews. This summarised the information and provided background understandings about each of the teachers. The second level of analysis interrogated the data using a grounded theory approach and arrived at the three themes of *change, power and identity*, with their accompanying categories and sub-categories. The third level of analysis expanded on the previous analyses and employed a discourse analytic approach using Gee's (1999) framework of 18 analytical questions, in conjunction with the research questions that were established at the outset of the research project. This facilitated the development of further understandings, derived from the teachers' perceptions of their individual identities in contexts of change.

The data analysis revealed the three main themes of *change*, *power* and *identity* which were further worked into three main findings, relating to issues of teacher professionalism, the effects of the actions of the education system on teachers and the relationship between change and identity. There were also findings that had been previously noted in literature and were substantiated through this study's findings. The findings that are discussed here relate to the actions of the education system on the teachers. Teachers working in the state government education system were required to act – teach and perform to a set of criteria which inevitably changed over time. Expectations about teachers accommodating new ways of doing things varied according to sites and districts. In general though, the education department – as their employer – had a largely implicit set of expectations about teacher's teaching practices and performance. There appeared to be little if any effective means of communicating these expectations to teachers.

The following four research findings about teachers in this study had previously been noted in the literature. Thus, they affirm existing research findings, and will be discussed briefly.

1. Teachers invested much of themselves in the act of teaching (Nias, 1989).
2. Teachers *are* what they *do*—teaching becomes more than the act of teaching (Nias, 1989; Waller, 1932).
3. Teachers exhibited care about their students and had definite understanding about what was best for students and their own practice (Menlo & Poppleton, 1999; Teachers' Federation of Victoria, 1986).
4. The teachers' relationships with the bureaucratic system, and/or its agents, were based round unequal power relationships (Apple, 1995; Smyth, 2001).

### **1. Teachers invested much of themselves in the act of teaching**

Nias' work (1989) has particular relevance to this study because her focus was on Primary teachers' work from their perspective. In her 1989 work she calls identity 'self' and looked at teacher identity development throughout their careers. She highlighted the importance of the ways that teaching as a job involves the teacher as a person. She foregrounded the interconnectedness of teachers' sense of self and the contexts of their work lives, discussing five elements that assist in the development and maintenance of the notion that the teachers *are* what they *do* for a living. Nias' (1989) elements include:

- the affective aspect of teachers work, that it is “felt as well as experienced” (p. 205)
- that there are large numbers of cognitive, practical and interpersonal skills required in daily tasks;
- that teaching is a demanding but potentially rewarding job;
- that it is in essence a private and isolated career and,
- that teachers rely on the recognition of their students for acknowledgement of a job well done (Nias, 1989).

The affective aspects of teachers’ work lives, the claim that teachers invest so much of themselves in their jobs and the assertion that teachers *are* what they *do*, that is, teachers don’t just teach, they *are teachers*, all have direct relevance to this study and were affirmed in the data.

## **2. Teachers *are* what they *do*—teaching becomes more than the act of teaching**

In tandem with this notion that teachers are more than the sum of their teaching tasks is the idea that teachers are also reciprocally influenced by their career. Both Nias (1989) and Waller (1932) highlighted this aspect of teaching – that teaching becomes more than just the act of teaching students. Teachers invest themselves heavily in their career and there is reciprocity of development at personal and professional levels as teachers progress through their working lives. This research evidenced the same sense of ‘oneness’ – teachers integrate their teaching lives with their personal lives. The separation of the ‘teacher’ and the ‘person’ seemed impossible.

## **3. Teachers exhibited care about their students and had definite understanding about what was best for students and their own practice**

Supported in many pieces of academic literature is the notion that teachers ‘knew’ what was best for their students and actively worked towards that in their teaching practice. Their dedication to the profession and commitment to the tasks of teaching have been previously acknowledged (S. Ball & I. F. Goodson, 1985; Batallan, 2003; Blase, 1997; Churchill, Williamson, & Grady, 1997; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Menlo & Poppleton, 1999; Teachers' Federation of Victoria, 1986). This understanding was well supported in the data in this study – through both direct statements and inferred attitudes. Teachers exhibited a caring, concerned attitude towards the students in their care and had definite understandings

about what was best for both the students and their own teaching practices.

#### **4. The teacher's relationships with the bureaucratic system, and/or its agents, were based round unequal power relationships**

The teachers in this study were cognizant that their relationship with their employer was not based on equal power relationships. They were quietly accepting of this situation, acknowledging that, as employees in an educational system they carried a responsibility to behave (or not behave) in certain ways. The inequality of their power base in this context did not seem to concern them. This awareness of the inequality of the relationships between them and their employer is also noted in educational literature (Apple, 1995; S. J. Ball & I. F. Goodson, 1985; Dean, 1999; Ingersoll, 2003; Smyth, 2001).

While the above listed 'findings' are not new, being evident in a variety of contexts in the educational literature, the following are new findings that were indicated from the data analysis. These are briefly discussed here.

1. These teachers' understandings about students' needs and their practice could create conflicts and concerns for them as they perceived a mis-fit between perspectives on educational issues from some of the policies, programs and practices that were initiated from the educational system.

The teachers were aware that, when innovations and policies were introduced that seemed at variance with what teachers understood to be best for their students, they experienced conflict. At these times they were forced to re-evaluate their understandings about their teaching practice, pedagogy, the innovation itself and their own teaching identity was called into question. The processes of finding resolution, resonance and clarification in these contexts caused stress, took time and energy, and potentially compromised their capacity to commit to the tasks of teaching.

2. Teachers demonstrated an awareness of the political, social and economic agendas of those who were in control of education.

All of the teachers in this study were aware that other agendas existed that drove the processes of change in education. They acknowledged the impact of political power. This included the

implications of state elections and changes in political party's agendas, changes in ministers of education at both the state and federal levels and individual politician's agendas. It also included the many social changes that impacted on education, including such things as changes to income, family structure, political correctness, and legalistic constraints. The role of financial issues in the processes of education did not go unnoticed for these teachers. They were well aware of the limitations and constraints of fiscal decisions that were made at federal, state and district levels. The implications for staffing, resources, programs, class numbers, and working conditions were noted by these teachers. Perhaps the most noted of these observations was the critiquing of the actions of the then federal minister for education (Dr David Kemp). There appeared to be a lack of correspondence between his decisions and statements about education and these teachers' perceptions about what was best for education.

3. These teachers exhibited cautious acceptance of the *status quo* of power relationships and actions in schools. In certain contexts of tension and uncertainty, when they sensed that the established boundaries for acceptable treatment were disregarded, they chose to act upon their concerns. These boundaries, though, were individually and contextually determined.

The teachers were certainly aware that, as employees they were bound to do the bidding of their employer, the Department of Education, and its agents – usually the principal, senior staff members and individuals in 'powerful' positions at district office. In the most part this did not create concerns. However, when specific instances arose, usually related to what they considered to be fair and reasonable (or more precisely unfair and unreasonable) treatment or expectations, then these teachers could choose to act upon their concerns. The boundaries about what was considered to be unfair or unreasonable though were individually determined and may have been dependent on the context or the personnel involved.

4. Teachers felt there was insufficient demonstrated appreciation, valuing or recognition of them and their work. Their opinions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and values were not reliably heard or valued by the educational system or society.

The teachers in this study noted the absence of and/or the lack of depth of recognition from the education system for their work. While acknowledging that they did not want much in the way of recognition, some kind of recognition would be appreciated.

Katrina, one of the eight participant teachers, talked about how she felt unappreciated by the

senior staff team in her school.

But I felt a lot of the frustration has been, not that I want bells and whistles, because I'm not that sort of person, but sometimes just a couple of words of appreciation from senior staff would have made all the difference I think (Katrina, transcript 2, p. 2).

The thesis goes on to explain:

In the dialogues with these teachers, there was a sense that they or their colleagues had experienced a lack of appreciation or had felt undervalued. These actions may or may not have been intended to lower the self-esteem of these teachers, but this was the consequence. The intentions of those in power were not investigated in this research. What is noted, though, are the ways in which these teachers experienced a diminished sense of being valued and appreciated by the educational system in general and by their senior staff in particular. Although specific incidents were mentioned, there was also a sense that these had a compound effect, resulting in a sense of being undervalued. In Katrina's case, this led her to request a transfer for the following year. In others' cases it was a more generalised sense of being undervalued, under-appreciated and unsupported in their teaching" (xxxxx, 2006 p. 220).

Katrina could also see the reverse situation where, when no feedback or valuing was happening, it caused her to wonder about what the senior staff thought of her:

But if you're not getting that positive feedback from senior staff you do wonder where you fit in the big picture. And you don't really know what they believe. They don't check your written planning. They don't check your philosophy, so they don't really have any understanding of what you're doing so I guess as far as that's concerned that's sort of driven me to that decision to move on (Katrina, T2, p. 4).

These teachers encountered various instances of devaluing, under-appreciation, and lack of support in the work that they did through the actions of their senior staff and principals. This took the form not only of failure to recognise the work that was being done, but numerous incidents where teachers were actively undermined and devalued by the actions of senior staff, principals and the broader educational system. These actions led to teachers experiencing a broad sense of disempowerment as teachers, and diminished their capacity to commit to the tasks of teaching.

5. These teachers showed generalised acceptance and compliance with the need for change, with less acceptance and approval about specific implementation issues.

The general notion that change is a beneficial, productive aspect of their educational lives was not contested by the teachers in the study. They understood the need for change and were accepting of this need. What they were less likely to validate was the mechanisms and implementation methods of a range of educational innovations. The main concern in this area was that of time and funding. There were repeated mentions of the need for more time – to read, assimilate and experiment with the innovation, and more departmental support in the

form of personnel, relief teaching and resource allocation. These changes affected not only the teachers in the form of added frustration, cynicism and stress, but it also impacted on students in the form that teachers were not as ready, willing or able to commit to the tasks of teaching as they may otherwise have been. The benefits of teachers who felt valued and appreciated by the system of education has far-reaching effects.

6. The teachers in this study discussed a range of emotions about issues of change—cynicism, frustration, hesitation, feeling overloaded, self-doubt, personal re-evaluations.

There were a range of negative emotions that were expressed by the teachers in this study. In most cases the emotions were linked together – e.g. frustration with cynicism – and sometimes they were causal – e.g. the self-doubt brought on hesitation to commit to teaching tasks which further accentuated the chances of negative emotion. There was also evidence of a spiral of negative emotions – with one negative creating or leading to others. But there was also strong evidence that these emotions were ‘managed’ well by the teachers – with them setting realistic boundaries and standards about what was acceptable (and unacceptable) behaviour – for them and what could be tolerated from their employer. When faced with an individually difficult situation, these teachers were aware of a ‘battening down of the hatches’ mentality whereby they would engage in self-protective behaviours. As Rosemaree, a participant teacher, said, “because the disillusionment is getting greater” that she could see teachers who would be “burrowing in a bit and coping within our own personal issues” (Rosemaree, transcript 2, p.10).

7. These teachers generally believed they were not given sufficient time or resources to properly implement the required changes. This led to frustration, cynicism and overload. It also caused them to question their worth and value to the educational system in contexts of ongoing educational change.

The many situations where teachers were expected to accommodate innovations with enthusiasm and vigour but were not given adequate time or resources to sufficiently accommodate the innovation, were noted by these teachers. What was of greater concern though was the realisation that, just as the teachers were starting to feel that they were coming to terms with each innovation, it would invariably be replaced by another. This sequence of changes, in ongoing succession, had a ‘wearing down’ effect on the teachers, causing them to

further question the necessity of such changes and placing at risk their capacity to genuinely engage with subsequent innovations and changes.

8. Conflicts and tensions were created when there was a mismatch of expectations, and lack of communication, or when teachers' opinions (their voices) are unable to be heard and acted upon.

Perhaps the greatest of all the frustrations noted by the teachers in this study was that of the mis-match of expectations. What was expected of teachers by the education system and/or its agents – their principals, senior staff or district office personnel – did not seem to match with what the teachers thought they should be doing. This situation was exacerbated if not created by a lack of communication on the part of the education system. Teachers' understanding about what they were supposed to be doing in the tasks of teaching came to them in a rather mysterious way. The line of communication was fragmented and unclear; different schools had differing understandings about policies and programs. Policies and programs were interpreted through the principal and the implications may play out differently for different schools. The notion of the 'voice of the teacher' – having a forum to speak, the recognition of being heard and the response of having their opinions and professional understandings taken into account when educational decisions were being made appeared to be non-existent for these teachers. This lack of genuine consultation with classroom-based teachers, paucity of positive response to any concerns that may be raised by brave teachers, and/or failure to actively recognise that teachers' knowledge and understandings about educational issues may be legitimate and valuable further served to make teachers question their worth to the education department.

These eight findings from the PhD research indicate the ways that the education department's actions impact on the teachers from this study. It acknowledges that the acts of teaching – at least in the state education system – has implications for teachers: teaching does something to teachers. The treatment is discussed in more detail.

### ***Treatment of teachers by the educational system***

The research evidenced the effects of the behaviour of the educational system on teachers. The implications for policy, practice and program implementation on teachers appeared to be more profound than was evidenced in the literature. That teachers perceived they

experienced a lack of support in contexts of ongoing educational change is, in itself, a concern. However, this research also indicated that teachers sensed a lack of genuine professional respect and courtesy through the actions of their employer and/or its agents. The sense that they were not valued, recognised for the work that they do, or appreciated, corroded their sense of significance to their employer and in turn shaped how they assigned value to themselves and their work. When teachers perceived that they were expected to continue to engage with change without the kinds of support that they felt they required to actively engage with change innovations, then tension, uncertainty and conflict were created. When the change was constant and the lack of adequate support mechanisms also persisted it sent a message to teachers about their perceived worth to the system.

The message to teachers was not a positive one. It indicated that they and the work that they perform are never good enough. The requirement of ongoing testing regimes, benchmarking of student progress, and reporting and assessment protocols that have been implemented by the educational system, told teachers they were not doing their job properly. This lack of professional trust and respect had corroded teacher's significance to their employer and shaped the value they assigned to themselves and their work. Their self-protective mechanisms, including the need to distance themselves from the tasks of teaching, diminished their commitment to teaching. The implications for teacher effectiveness and productivity are the potential for reduction in the effectiveness of student learning.

The implications of this point are that, if educational systems want to maintain elevated levels of student learning through the conduit of contented and committed teachers, then the goodwill that has been at risk of further erosion from the perception that teachers are not realistically supported in the processes of ongoing educational change needs restoration work. The evidence from this study suggests that goodwill might be restored by improving lines of effective communication at a variety of levels within the system, listening to what teachers have to say and acting on it, valuing their work in ways that are acceptable to them and supporting them more effectively in the processes of change. If these issues were addressed, then through enhanced and deliberate communication across the educational hierarchy, teachers would be more likely to sense that they and the work that they perform was valued and supported. Moreover they would have a sense that their employer was realistic in its expectations of them and that their role in the processes of education—as a

valued conduit for student learning—would be validated as worthwhile. This would signal a return of professional respect and courtesy. Teachers would be less protective and distancing of themselves and their work, more committed and motivated, and student learning would not be at risk of decline.

Perhaps the most significant implication that can be evidenced from this research comes from the notion that has been put forward by Michael Fullan—you can't mandate what matters (Fullan, 1997). While Fullan discusses this statement in light of how to effectively manage change, from this study I am asserting that it is the *teachers that matter*. Mandating—requiring and demanding—that they *be* and *do* in a particular manner does not appear to be an effective strategy for managing teachers. The data suggests that telling them how to think and feel about issues of change (McGill-Franzen, 2000) is unlikely to be effective. Working with them on issues of change, listening and valuing their input, although a more complex process, is more likely to produce the result of effective and motivated teachers and enhanced student learning (Fullan, 1997).

Returning Waller's inference (1932) that teaching does something to those who teach, then it appears that this study evidences this assertion. But beyond that, the impact of continual change on these teachers is not a positive one. They are stressed, frustrated and cynical as a result of the actions and inaction of the education system. The teachers were not trusted by the education system to do the best with their students. They were repeatedly monitored, checked and called to account for themselves. Their voices, concerns and opinions were not recognised. They were unsure about what was officially expected of them in the tasks of teaching because of continual changes, yet they knew what they should be doing.

Communication between teachers and the education department appeared to be neither effective nor open. These actions had the combined effect on the teachers of causing them to question their worth to the system. It placed at risk their capacity to continue to commit wholeheartedly to the tasks of teaching. In summary, this study evidenced the education system's treatment of teachers appeared to be lacking professional respect and courtesy. It was not based on trust. Teachers are aware of this corrosion of their value to their employer and it shaped the value they assigned to themselves and their overall working lives.

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I am more than happy to discuss issues relating to the contents of this paper with a view to continuing the professional conversations. Please feel free to contact me on:

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