

2002

# Don't Steal the Struggle! The Commercialization of Literacy and Its Impact on Teachers

Kathryn Hibbert

*The University of Western Ontario*, [khibber2@uwo.ca](mailto:khibber2@uwo.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/edupub>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Citation of this paper:

Hibbert, Kathryn, "Don't Steal the Struggle! The Commercialization of Literacy and Its Impact on Teachers" (2002). *Education Publications*. 34.

<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/edupub/34>

## **Don't Steal the Struggle! Commercialization of Literacy and its Impact on the 'Good Teacher'**

I was recently asked to participate on a panel responding to the question "What makes a good teacher?" The audience will be a class of undergraduates anticipating a future career in teaching. The question is one that has been explored by others (Beishuizen, 2001, Thomas, 1998, Halliday, 1996, Hare, 1993) yet consistently evades a definitive response. It is a question that has occupied a great deal of my own thinking recently as I moved from classroom teacher, to teacher educator. I do not doubt the students in both my pre-service and in-service literacy programs desire to be good teachers. But what has *being a good teacher* come to mean to them at the turn of the century? With this in mind, I turn to a recent conversation I had with one of my pre-service literacy students.

*Setting: Pre-service class, Faculty of Education*

*Student hands full-page newspaper article to teacher. Article reports recent provincial literacy scores as still unsatisfactory, and points to teacher education as the current focus for blame.*

*Student: Well? What do you think of this? I have had all kinds of people ask me about what literacy programs you are teaching us at the Faculty and I have had to tell them that we aren't being taught a program! I will leave here this year and not come out with a program!*

*Teacher: That's true, you won't learn 'a program', but you will have a solid understanding of how children learn to read so that whatever program you encounter in your practice can be used thoughtfully. Our goal is that you leave here able to make good decisions about the way you structure your lessons. You need to know your students. You need to understand the beliefs that underlie the methods in order to become a reflective practitioner. No one program is going to meet all of your students' needs. Without an understanding of language acquisition theories, special needs and ways to use literature in your classroom for example, you may adopt any program currently being heralded uncritically. This would be a disservice to both you and your students.*

I would like to believe that this conversation simply reflected this student's inexperience, anxiety and desire to become a good teacher. However, similar concerns have surfaced in my in-service classes as well, amongst the more established teachers I have encountered. When asked to describe their language arts classrooms, several of these experienced teachers simply summed it up through naming their board's program of choice; as though statements like "I am Animated Literacy Teacher" said it all. What would prompt teachers to reduce the rich complexities of their language arts instruction to the name of a commercial program? Is that identification with commercialization somehow tied into their notion of being a good literacy teacher?

Seeking to better understand these responses I thought about the larger social political context within which teachers work. Increasingly it seems, the predominance of market ideology is seeping into education (Engel, 2000) and literacy is no exception. In fact, specific levels of literacy often become the measure by which public education (and by extension teachers) are evaluated. In the province of Ontario as elsewhere, measurement has been embraced as the silver bullet that will lead education into the age of accountability. An 'arms-length' organization, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has been established at great public expense to manage the process. Citing corporate guru Tom Peters "What gets measured gets done" (2000, online) this organization measures those aspects of math and literacy that have been deemed important. Despite cautions and arguments against such practices, local newspapers routinely publish and rank annual school-by-school test results.

Since we have not yet achieved 'excellence for all', the reported numbers inevitably translate into a lack of competence either on the part of the teachers, the boards or the Faculties of Education. The ensuing conversations that are taken up by teachers' unions, board and government officials are often reduced to defending their respective positions. However, as Janice Gross Stein points out:

"Beneath the growing controversy surrounding testing as the principal mechanism of accountability lies a largely unheard conversation about the goals and values of public education ... Our expectations of our schools as parents, citizens and society are far too rich to be captured by a single test" (2001, p.167).

A different conversation in this province may be largely unheard because the Premier and his Ministers have stated that "standardized testing is the **only** way we can really know if our students are truly learning" (my emphasis, Harris, 1997, online).

Instead of engaging in conversations about the goals and values of public education, boards of education, school administrators and teachers are kept occupied and distracted completing mandatory paperwork and surveys in addition to implementing the tests for EQAO. Finally, they must develop annual action response plans detailing how they plan to do better next year. Lurking in the not so distant background are organizations such as the Fraser Institute, whose motto 'Competitive Market Solutions for Public Policy Problems' promotes

an underlying belief that the market can come to the rescue. The notion that a quick fix solution exists is particularly troublesome.

It is good business sense to anticipate the needs of consumers. With repeated and relatively unquestioned reports of falling literacy scores in abundance, publishers have responded with numerous 'literacy programs' that are marketed and constructed as 'teacher-proof' and ready-made. Fuelled by mounting public pressure, short time lines and high stakes testing, boards are increasingly turning to market solutions. Although purchased programs form only one component of these comprehensive action plans, their effect on teachers is palpable.

Public education in Ontario has experienced significant financial cutbacks in recent years. When large numbers of limited dollars are spent on selected programs and training, the message to teachers is clear. First, they communicate that faith has been placed in these programs to deliver the results that the teachers did not. Second, they cast the teacher into the role of 'received knower', submitting to authority outside of their own knowledge and experience (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997). In my in-service literacy courses, even experienced teachers expressed fear of straying from the program's structure, concerned that doing so may jeopardize the upcoming test's results, for which they would be held accountable.

In a recent publication of the Massey Lecture Series, Janice Gross Stein examined the notion of increased accountability in what she deemed the *Cult of Efficiency* (2001). At one point Gross Stein described the outcome of an inquest

into the death of a young child by starvation while in the care of a social agency. The jury rendered the death a homicide. Of particular note was the relief this verdict brought to the head of the social agency - relief experienced because the death was determined to be a "systems failure". The *people* involved in the social agency were not responsible, the system was.

Interesting. Such determinations have led me to question whether the demand for greater public accountability leads to systemic responses which then distance individuals from responsibility. I am concerned that a parallel may occur in literacy instruction. When teachers adhere rigidly to a program under threat of this type of accountability, they lose the 'self' that teaches. Instead of being thoughtful decision-makers, teachers of programs are reduced to managers; their thinking limited to functionalist implementation of a pre-conceived structure. Lost is the dynamic interplay between teacher and student. Lost too is the critical edge so necessary as teachers reflect upon the decisions they make in the classroom.

Fox (2001) observes that adherence to program orthodoxies leads to "less challenge, less struggle, less delight, less reality, less learning, and ultimately, less literacy" (p.105). Coperhaven (2001) also notes that imposed structures cause "many elementary teachers [to] adopt an efferent stance toward literature, ... the efferent stance is the 'default' stance when time is limited" (p. 153). These examples suggest a resigned distancing; they suggest that teachers become less professionally engaged and therefore less invested in their practice.

Perhaps it is a matter of self- preservation; if the adopted program fails, the program can be blamed, discarded and a new program then embraced. Perhaps the 'good teacher' becomes one who conforms to the latest market innovation currently understood to provide *the* answer in obtaining the desired numbers on the next test.

What happens to the teacher's identity in such a social political context? It becomes *dis-connected* from the learning teaching process and reconfigured in an attempt to match that of 'good teacher' conceived outside of the system. Parker Palmer reminds us that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher" (1998, p. 10). Yet, we do not value a teacher's wisdom of experience in the same way it may be held in a place of high esteem in other professions. Teachers who hold on to older methods are described as 'not getting on board', 'difficult' or 'dinosaurs'. I must confess that I believed that to be the case in my earliest years of teaching. Eager to be a 'good teacher', I worked very hard to master the latest techniques and methodologies espoused as innovative and embraced at the time.

It was not until I had the opportunity to leave my own classroom and become a Resource Teacher that my perception shifted dramatically. As I worked with students in the various classrooms within the school, I noted that many of the more established teachers were able to quietly discern how the new programs differed from the old, and they selected and integrated components

that would best serve their students rather than utilizing programs and methods in order to remain professionally 'hip'.

With their years of experience, established teachers have recognized that market savvy publishers have spun old ideas into fresh packages, given them catchy names and mass marketed their finished products to Boards of Education for profit. Is it really necessary to purchase a commercially prepared product and support materials in order to include the elements of Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Working With Words and Writing in our classrooms? These instructional strategies are basic components of literacy instruction that form part of the balanced approach offered by teachers. We know *better*. This is why I was surprised to find recently that even those established teachers are succumbing to outside authority, increasingly shifting their practices to better align with the commercial model of the day.

I want my students to *know better*. I want my students to know when, why, how and where components of literacy development can be used to meet the needs of their students in conjunction with addressing curricular expectations. In his 1993 book *What Makes A Good Teacher* William Hare argues:

"We need to be less concerned about their allegiance to particular methods and more concerned about their grasp of the principles which lie behind whatever educational approaches seem appropriate in their situation. ... we need to look for individuals who can intelligently review new ideas which come along" (p.161)



If we are going to intelligently review new ideas as they come along, we need to develop what Dorothy Strickland refers to as 'good teacher consumerism' (Strickland et al, 2001). What happens when allegiance is given to a particular program? What gets left out? Copenhaver (2001) argues that prescribed programs take time away from good literacy practices reverting to lower level questions that are easier to manage within time structures. Research has consistently shown "that flexibility, adaptability, and creativity are among the most important determinants of teachers effectiveness ... [and that] policies that seek to teacher-proof instruction undermine these qualities" (Darling Hammond, 1997, p. 72).

I do not wish to suggest that commercial literacy programs are of no value. They can be immensely useful as resource frameworks for new teachers and to introduce new ways of thinking about methods and techniques to more established teachers. The unquestioned utilization of a particular program or model however, does suggest that we have not adequately addressed questions such as those Hoffman posed in 1998: "Where is the line between providing excellent resources and controlling teacher actions? ... How do you respect teachers as professionals and yet be responsive to the fact that there are major differences between beginning, early career and established teachers?" (1998, p. 110).

Inherent in these conversations is the need to dispel the myth that one best way to teach reading exists. (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999) Acknowledging the complexities of literacy instruction, our learners, and ourselves as literacy

teachers requires acknowledging that at times we are searching for solutions and that we seek to learn from both our successes and our challenges. Some of the best lessons emerge from the struggle.

My conversation with my student hints at many of the political elements of reading: "power, values, struggle, marginality, control, normalization, relationship between public and private levels of our lives, critique and hope (Shannon, 1999, p. 33). Teaching *is* a social practice, and as such it is necessarily embedded within the larger social political context. Within that larger context it becomes critical to develop communities of practice in the teaching profession that support a relationship of mutual accountability (Wenger, 1998):

"Defining a joint enterprise is a process, not a static agreement. It produces relations of accountability that are not just fixed constraints or norms. These relations are manifested not as conformity but as the ability to negotiate actions as accountable to an enterprise. The whole process is as generative as it is constraining. It pushes the practice forward as much as it keeps it in check. An enterprise both engenders and directs social energy. It spurs action as much as it gives it focus. It involves our impulses and emotions as much as it controls them. It invites new ideas as much as it sorts them out. An enterprise is a resource of coordination, of sense-making, of mutual engagement; it is like rhythm to music" (p. 82).

It is simply not productive to engage only in polar combative debates over singular issues. If system authorities are not yet prepared to include teachers in legitimate discussions, then teachers must make use of the forums like *Talking Points* to articulate what matters most. We must underscore "the importance of *flexibility* to teach adaptively, the importance of *relationships* with students for knowing them well and motivating them, and the critical need to *focus on learning* rather than on the implementation of procedures" (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p.71).

### References

- Belenky, M. F., Bond, L.A., Weinstock, J.S. (1997). Otherness. In Belenky, M., Bond, L.A., & Weinstock (Eds.). *A Tradition That Has No Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families and Communities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Beishuizen, J. (2001). Students' and teachers' cognitions about good teachers. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 71, 185-202.
- Copenhaver, J. (2001). Running out of time: Rushed read-alouds in a primary classroom. *Language Arts*, 79 (2) 148-158.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The Right to Learn*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Duffy, G.G., & Hoffman, J.V. (1999). In pursuit of an illusion: The flawed search for a perfect method. *The Reading Teacher*, 53 (1), 10-16.
- Engel, M. (2000). *The Struggle for Control of Public Education: Market Ideology*

vs. *Democratic Values*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fox, M. (2001). Have we lost our way? *Language Arts*, 79 (2) 105-113.

Gross Stein, J. (2001). *The Cult of Efficiency*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

Hare, W. (1993). *What Makes a Good Teacher?* London: The Althouse Press.

Halliday, J. (1996). *Back to Good Teaching: Diversity Within Tradition*. London:

Cassell.

Harris, M. (1997). The premier's televised address to the public. (Text). [Online]

Available:

<http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/english/speeches/archive/strike.htm>

Hoffman, J.V. (1998). When bad things happen to good ideas in literacy

education: Professional dilemmas, personal decisions, and political traps.

*The Reading Teacher*, 52 (2) 102-112.

Palmer, Parker. (1998). *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Publishers.

Peters, T. [Online 2001] In Education Quality and Accountability Office.

Available:[http://www.eqao.com/eqao/home\\_page/pdf\\_e/00/00P056e.pdf](http://www.eqao.com/eqao/home_page/pdf_e/00/00P056e.pdf)

Routman, R. (1996). *Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading,*

*Writing and Other Teaching Dilemmas*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Shannon, P. (1999). Politics of reading: Every step you take. *The Reading*

*Teacher*, 53 (1) 32-34.

Strickland, D.S., Bodino, A., Buchan, K., Jones, K., Nelson, A., & Rosen, M.

(2001). Teaching writing in a time of reform. *The Elementary School*

*Journal*, 101 (4) 385-494.

Thomas, J.A. (1998). On becoming a good teacher: Reflective practice with regard to children's voices. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 49 (5), 372-391.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.