

Editorial: Reclaiming the professional development agenda in an age of compliance

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This issue of the journal takes as its starting point a global context, which has seen certain powerful and pervasive discourses underpinning a raft of educational reforms in a number of educational settings, in particular the United Kingdom, USA, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. These reforms have, among other things, been characterised by a rhetoric of devolution accompanied, ironically, by an assertion by the state and other central agencies of control over the what (curriculum) and how (pedagogy) of teaching, often driven by a "standards" agenda. These changes have had an enormous impact on the nature of teachers' work through the implementation of managerial organisational practices and other accountability mechanisms. It can be argued that in such a context, professional development, in being yoked to a reform agenda, has become little more than induction into ideological compliance. This issue seeks to bring together the voices of educational researchers and reflective teachers who have investigated the changing nature of professional development across a range of educational settings.

The editors of this issue are based in antipodean settings, New Zealand and England. Contributors to this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* hail from Australia, Canada and the United States. As editors, we have been privileged to engage in conversations with a range of contributors. Yet, as readers of this issue will discover, we seem collectively to be engaging in the same conversation. It is a conversation centred fairly and squarely on the question: What and whose agenda currently operates to shape the body of professional knowledge to which we are expected to be accountable as professionals?

Before indicating ways in which the contributors to this journal address this question, it behoves us as editors to reflect a little on the situation in our own contexts. In New Zealand, changes in the 1990s turned the national curriculum from one based on aims and brief descriptions of content into one fixated on detailing outcomes as achievement objectives set out in eight levels. In addition to curriculum changes, schools in New Zealand in the 1990s were made "self-managing" through Boards of Trustees (BOTs) and responsible for monitoring and reporting student achievement publicly. Regional education boards (equivalent to LEAs in England) were dismantled. The Education Review Office (ERO), comparable to OFSTED in England, was established to review and report every three years on a school's effectiveness and make recommendations for improvement if necessary. Schools became legally obligated to introduce performance management systems in the name of accountability, which became the watchword for a range of organisational changes in primary schools to ensure that schools and teachers complied with the reform agenda. Unlike the situation in England, however, there is no national testing of students in primary schools, though there is national monitoring of student

achievement via the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP). However, recently schools have been required to set achievement targets and report annually to the Ministry of Education, as well as to their community, on how well these have been achieved. In a recent study as part of the York-Waikato Teacher Professionalism Project, New Zealand primary teachers are seen as negotiating competing versions of what it means to be “professional” and having to deal with discursive reconstructions of the very terms with which they were used to thinking about their own work (e.g. “integrated”, “creative”, “child-centred”) (Locke & Hill, 2003).

Besides a new curriculum, New Zealand secondary teachers have had to grapple with the introduction of a highly controversial, senior school qualifications system, the National Certificate for Educational Achievement (NCEA). Operating out of body of expertise conditioned by a university degree, secondary English teachers took issue with many aspects of these reforms (Locke, 2001a). However, the NCEA has been operating as a powerfully pervasive influence on classroom practice, with its assessment regime constituting a fragmented, de facto “English” curriculum shaping classroom metalanguage, and its omnipresent workbooks and exemplars leading to “success” by drilling (see Locke, 2001b). Like the curriculum reforms that immediately preceded it, the NCEA was accompanied by large-scale professional development (in effect training) days (“Jumbo Days”). Many teachers attending these days felt browbeaten into submission and deprived of opportunities for critique. As the NCEA beds in, the murmurings appear to have been quelled. Or have they?

The following letter appeared in the *New Zealand Listener* in the week this editorial was written:

Like most teachers, I had strong concerns about the NCEA (*Letters*, September 25) when it was introduced. Like most teachers I made my concerns clear during NCEA training and at every possible feedback opportunity that followed. Like most teachers I have been reduced to silence.

This is not, as NZQA would have you believe, because once the system was “bedded in” I saw that it was very good – it is simply because I have given up the struggle. As our principal reminds the staff before every parent/teacher evening, we must set aside our reservations and put the best possible spin on NCEA because it is the only qualification these kids are going to get....

This is exactly what NZQA are counting on. It is also why the promised teacher vote on the NCEA (which was to be held at the end of 2002 once we had “trialed” Level 1) never took place. Given enough time, people will come to accept anything – especially if it means avoiding the upheaval of yet another change in the system. If the NCEA vote was held now, even I would be tempted to tick the “Oh God let’s just get on with it” box.

This is how a system becomes hopelessly corrupted. I am watching it happen but like most teachers, I have neither the influence nor the energy to do anything about it (Williams, 2004, p. 10).

Here, manifestly, is the anguish of defeat and professional compromise, redeemed, one might argue, by the presence of enough energy to send off a letter to a weekly magazine.

Meanwhile, teacher education in New Zealand has been left *relatively* safe from direct government intervention and control. In the mid-1990s, tertiary institutions narrowly

escaped being yoked to an extreme form of the standardised outcomes agenda currently manifested in the thousands of atomised units that make up the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Teacher education providers (university and non university-based) have been able, if willing, to design courses that balance broad-based educational critique and narrowly, instrumental compliance. However, there are changes in the wind, as the Government turns its attention to initial teacher education and induction, and prepares a future direction in “consultation” with relatively new bodies such as the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), as well as the more established New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and Education Review Office (ERO). It is too early to predict the mechanisms the Government will adopt to ensure that teachers fulfil a particular definition of “quality”. However, the word “lever” occurs frequently in the early documentation related to this new move, with a suggestion that the Government will mandate entry and exit standards for student teachers, and strengthen quality assurance mechanisms for providers and programmes. In respect of teacher education, increased compliance is in the air.

In England in the early 1990s, two groups defied Margaret Thatcher and her government. One group was the miners, whose long strike and gradual defeat signalled the end of an era and of an industry. The other group were the English teachers, who boycotted the introduction of Standardised tests for 14-year-olds by refusing to administer or mark them. This boycott was successful for two years and then the Government simply changed tack, making Head Teachers liable for the administration of the tests and paying external markers to assess them. While this was not a defeat, it was very much a sign of things to come. English teachers in 2004 are still here but they now show only occasional moments of defiance. Significantly, however, there is a new movement to boycott the tests, as yet without much influence, but certainly of symbolic importance.

So are English teachers in England somehow “defeated”? No, they are not, and recent research (Goodwyn, 2003, 2004) shows that they have adopted rather more low-key forms of subversion. However, their working lives are emblematic of the age of compliance within which so many teachers in many countries now struggle. The subject English has always attracted political attention and now it finds itself in the spotlight of insistent surveillance. It is helpful to list some features of life in English schools. Pupils sit national tests at 7, 11 and 14, and the results of the tests are turned into “League Tables” which are published in a variety of formats; the results are not adjusted or contextualised in relation to the socio-economic catchments of each school. Schools are inspected every few years; a report is written and published grading the school and placing it in “Special Measures” if so deemed. A year in Special Measures and it is likely to be closed. There is a statutory national curriculum for English 5-16 and an additional Primary Literacy Strategy and the Secondary Framework for English. Both of these are technically “advisory” but everyone is following them. All teachers must undergo a performance review each year.

Institutions that train teachers are inspected every three years and if they are found non-compliant in any respect they may be closed. Their funding comes from the Teacher Training Agency (not from the body that funds all other aspects of Higher education) and this extends to Masters courses, which have also been inspected once.

There is a statutory National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training in English and National Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

What such lists cannot do is reveal the atmosphere of prescription and control. In a recent survey, experienced teachers, in particular, expressed rage and frustration at the current climate of the English classroom (Goodwyn, 2004). But there is evidence that the manacles of excessive accountability and obsessive prescription are loosening their grip. A survey of English teachers and of official sources in the summer of 2004 suggests a more dialogic approach is developing (Goodwyn, in press 2005). Even the Government has reintroduced teacher assessment at Key Stage 1 (i.e. for 7-year-olds). Has the tide turned? Only time will tell.

All contributors to this issue, to some degree, negotiate a position on compliance. Tonalities vary. It is striking and quite accurate that Sydney-based Wayne Sawyer defines England's current regime as a kind of touchstone of extremes. He examines how the national government in Australia is constantly looking to bring in increased control over curriculum and over teacher autonomy in a manner that would mirror England. He is able to analyse how a federal system may help to protect English teachers from the excesses of England but he also seeks to alert Australian teachers to develop their resistance strategies in plenty of time.

Graham Parr, writing in Victoria, Australia, is equally concerned about a potentially bleak future shaped by powerful, managerial forces. But in a vignette, which he uses to round off his article, he demonstrates how teachers can maintain a sense of professional esteem and confidence and how, through humour and the shared enjoyment of professional conversation, they can continue to develop as teachers and as people. His vignette offers the prospect of a delicious descent into "chaos" as a countervailing antidote to the sterile weight of rationalising reform.

Trevor Gambell, writing about teacher involvement in a large-scale literacy assessment project in Canada in 1998, shows how participation in such a project is not necessarily inimical to the professional interests of teachers. Gambell tracks, through a series of in-depth interviews, the responses of four different secondary English teachers to the induction they received and the tasks they were asked to perform. Rather than the involvement depriving these teachers of a sense of professional autonomy and judgement, it is shown to have enabled them to hone their critical skills and to use the experience as a way of reflecting on their content and practical knowledge, critiquing their own teaching and evaluation practices, and refining their sense of professional identity.

Three contributions to this issue come out of *Teachers investigate unequal literacy outcomes: Cross-generational perspectives*, a research project funded by the Australian Research Council (2002-2004) and lead by grantees, Barbara Comber and Barbara Kamler (from the University of South Australia and Deakin University respectively). The project is guided by three fundamental principles: a commitment to teachers as researchers; the fostering of respectful cross-generational relationships; and collective problem-solving. In this respect, it might be viewed as an example of what Judyth Sachs has termed "activist professionalism", which goes beyond traditional conceptions of professionalism

in that its *raison d'être* is fundamentally political in that it brings together alliances and networks of various education interest groups for collective action to improve, at the macro level, all aspects of the education enterprise and at the micro level, student learning outcomes and teachers' status in the eyes of the community (1999, p. 1).

Working together as co-researchers and teachers, these contributors offer a model of trust, mutual respect, pro-activity and effective networking which contests top-down models of reform which diminish trust and enforce compliance.

One of these contributions, from Barbara Comber, Barbara Kamler, Di Hood, Sue Moreau and Judy Painter, is woven out of conversations that took place over thirty months, from workshops, teleconferences, teachers' writing and teachers' audio-taped reflections. As the title suggests, they tell a powerful story of how so-called "professional development" can serve to disempower teachers and diminish their sense of professionalism. More importantly, they offer a model of how things *can* otherwise be – of professional development that works to empower teachers and enhance their professional sense while at the same time achieving results where it matters – with individual children in classrooms. As a model, it offers an alternative to "teacher effectiveness" advocates (see Graham Parr's article) who "measure" teacher effectiveness in terms of the achievement of narrow, predetermined outcomes that ignore the rich specifics of particular classroom situations.

The second of these contributions, from Lyn Kerkham (University of South Australia) and Kirsten Hutchison (Deakin University), provides a case study account of how the project works. In this account we read the story of Nola, an early-career primary school teacher and her success in re-connecting her pupil, Ewan, to the school literacy programme. Supported by her participation in the project, Nola was able to embark over time in a process which involved her in scrutinising critically the dominant school discourses around early years literacy and assessment, disrupt those discourses through access to new interpretative frames and engage in curriculum redesign.

One of the key emphases of Kerkham and Hutchison is the concept of teachers as "agentive". The idea is echoed in Eileen Honan's article, which focuses closely on the active way in which two teachers become what she terms "bricoleurs", constructing meaningful assemblages of classroom practice as they negotiate a range of different discourses (including critical literacy), as well as the documents of the Queensland English Syllabus. Such a view of teachers, she asserts, challenges assumptions that teachers are no more than atheoretical and blind followers of departmental policies and curriculum directives.

Josephine Ryan (Australian Catholic University) also provides a small case study. Her title, "Lecturer as teacher. Teacher as researcher", is a clear indication of how hierarchical divisions can become blurred and undermined when teachers and researchers work collaboratively and with mutual respect, using an action research model, to address the needs of students, in this case a Year Seven class of 30 boys from working-class and multiple-language backgrounds.

This is the sixth issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* and heralds a new structure for the contents page. Articles are now in two categories, "Topical Articles" and "Articles in Dialogue". Christine Sleeter's article on "Critical multicultural curriculum and the standards movement" can be seen as entering into dialogue with

Volume III, Number i of the journal, on the challenge of teaching English in a multilingual or monolingual context. Written out of the American context, it outlines the tensions that exist between the multicultural movement and the contemporary standards movement; the latter is in the ascendancy as curriculums become more centrally controlled by state and federal agencies. Using four central curriculum questions, Sleeter focuses on three early-career teachers in the US, who are committed to critical multiculturalism and who are attempting to negotiate these tensions. Implicit in this account, however, and relevant to the theme of this issue, is the role Sleeter herself plays, as the more experienced colleague-in-support of teachers engaging in these crucial acts of professional negotiation.

In this issue, there are two narratives. The first of these is the third contribution to come from the *Teachers investigate unequal literacy outcomes: Cross-generational perspectives* project. In it, we find two teachers, an older, experienced one (Ivan Boyer) and a beginning teacher (Bev Maney), reflecting on the mutual benefits of the reciprocal bond they have established as they reflect on a range of theoretical, pedagogical and professional issues. Complementing the dialogue between these two teachers, project directors Comber and Kamler offer a contextualising gloss on the issues raised, and highlight how the project is helping teachers reclaim the professional development agenda by enabling them to participate in collaborative networks, foster the production of their strategic knowledge, and critique structures and practices which diminish teachers' professional learning and judgement.

In the second teacher narrative, a beginning teacher, Natalie Bellis from Victoria, Australia, puts herself on the line as she uses STELLA (see Wayne Sawyer's article) as a cue for personal and professional interrogation. In the Australian context, STELLA has been an initiative whereby the English teaching profession itself was proactive in developing professional standards for itself. The extent to which professional standards are indeed a blessing is an issue that will be explored further in the next issue of this journal. What Natalie Bellis has offered here, is an opportunity for readers to use the hypertext medium to share with her an aspect of her own professional journey of self-discovery and self-reflection.

In an extended review of Gillborn and Youdell's (2000) book, *Rationing education: Policy, practice, reform and equity*, Naz Rassool (2002) reports that "the authors argue that a culture of compliance engendered by the surveillance and disciplining model of control now defines the educational terrain" (p. 136). Gillborn and Youdell are writing out of the context of England. However, the contributors to this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* would support the view that the "culture of compliance" is a widespread phenomenon across a range of educational settings. Despite all this, there is a clear perception represented here that this state of affairs is neither desirable nor necessary. Indeed, in different ways, these contributions testify to the power and potential of alternative models of professional development. Above all, they maintain faith in the capacity for critical and professional self-reflection in individual teachers.

A note to readers and potential contributors:

The Natalie Bellis narrative is a Powerpoint slide-show presentation that has been converted to hypertext. We have maximised this process given the software available,

but readers will find that the quality of the hypertext varies according to operating system and browser used. In future, we will not be accepting contributions in Powerpoint. Contributions should be Microsoft Word documents or hypertext documents.

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