Teachers’ work and pedagogy in an era of accountability

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A great deal of educational policy proceeds as though teachers are malleable and ever-responsive to change. Some argue they are positioned as technicians who simply implement policy. However, how teachers go about their work and respond to reform agendas may be contingent upon many factors that are both biographical in nature and workplace related. In this paper we discuss the work of middle school teachers in low-socio economic communities from their perspectives. Referring to reflective interviews, meeting transcripts and an electronic reporting template, we examine how teacher participants in a school reform project describe their work – what they emphasise and what they down-play or omit. Using Foucaultian approaches to critical discourse analysis and insights from Dorothy Smith’s (2005) Institutional Ethnography, we consider the ‘discursive economy’ (Carlson, 2005) in teachers’ reported experiences of their everyday practices in northern suburbs schools in South Australia in which a democratic progressive discourse exists alongside corporate and disciplinary discourses.

Keywords: Teachers’ work, pedagogy, accountability, discourse, middle schooling

Introduction

Throughout the nineties, and escalating at the turn of the century, Australian educational policy was dominated by a human capital discourse at the national level. As successive federal governments (both Labor and Liberal) reiterated the importance of educational standards in terms of the nation’s competitiveness in a global knowledge economy, supplemental federal educational funds began to be tied to participation in national benchmarking and testing. With the election of the Rudd Labor government in late 2007, despite the promise of an education revolution, the dominance of human capital ideologies and discourses of managerialism and standardisation prevail. Education is now firmly ensconced within the government’s productivity agenda. Indeed there is a stark continuity between the Howard and Rudd governments. It now seems impossible to discuss high quality education without the insistence on reporting, standardised curriculum and assessment metrics. The Rudd government as yet offers no alternative to the prevailing discursive economy that circulates within public education, an economy in which a democratic progressive discourse is displaced by corporate and disciplinary discourses (Carlson, 2005). The proliferation of policy and associated bureaucratic processes put together school performance, literacy standards and performance-based pay for teachers.

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Without debating the politics, limits and dangers of relentless accountability, here we note its pervasiveness in order to situate the discussion which follows. Smith (2005) has argued that in this managerialist era, the work of many professionals is being reorganised around translocal key texts which coordinate their work activities, such as standardised tests, performance-based salary structures and so on. This idea leads us to the questions we explore in this article:

- How do teachers who work in disadvantaged schools describe their work?
- How can we understand teachers’ silences and keywords?
- What differences might the displacement of educational discourses by corporate and disciplinary discourses in the current political context make to teachers’ everyday working lives?

When teachers are told repeatedly that student performance is contingent upon the quality of their teaching, and when no excuses will be brooked for low standards, how and where can they ethically voice the challenges of their lived experiences in working with young people growing up in poverty? We have been researching literacy, poverty and schooling for over three decades and we have contested deficit discourses which lead to low expectations for the educational outcomes of young people in schools in poor areas. However, what happens when the actual everyday experiences of teachers and students can no longer be discussed – what psychic and actual consequences might be anticipated? While we read daily of the failures of public schooling and low literacy standards in a relentless attack by the media, at the same time when teachers talk about their work in these times, they speak little about pedagogy, student learning and academic achievement and more about seemingly pointless bureaucratic demands and trying to work with students who are hungry and violent, poorly clothed and mentally ill, and who may be hoping for brighter futures but are still alienated from schooling.

In what follows we draw on a three-year action-research project in which a large team of university-based educational researchers worked with middle years teachers in ten state high schools in South Australia to investigate the redesign and implementation of curriculum and pedagogy in the interests of more socially just outcomes for their students. First we briefly describe the research context before exploring how teachers did (or did not) talk about pedagogy. Next we explore how they did talk about their work, and consider the ‘discursive economy’ (Carlson, 2005) which shapes their everyday work and their identities as teachers in state-schools subject to corporate ‘reform’. We argue that the ways in which teachers speak about their work serve to obliterate, or relegate to the background, other aspects of their labour which are essential to negotiating the academic ‘rigour’ in their curriculum, a term to which they were strongly committed and emphasized repeatedly during the project.

The research context

Our project which focused on teachers’ redesign of school pedagogies in the middle-years of schooling came to be known as Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN), hereafter referred to as RPiN¹. The project was located in ten schools in the South Australian city of Adelaide’s northern suburbs, a region in which people have for many years experienced high levels of poverty and unemployment and associated
socio-cultural complexities (see Thomson, 2002). The project arose in part because of worrying statistics about low school completion rates for young people in the northern suburbs, anecdotal evidence from school leaders and practitioners themselves, and other studies of middle schooling, which together appeared to indicate that school systems were experiencing various crises in educating young adolescents (Carrington, 2006; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2005; Luke, Elkins, Weir, et al., 2003).

Three teachers from each of the ten schools in the project were nominated and/or volunteered to work in collaboration with each other and with the research team over a period of two years to design, implement and inquire into curriculum and pedagogy that ‘engaged’ and ‘connected with’ their students in Years 7-9. The project sought to build on insights from other research about middle schooling which emphasised the importance of connecting the curriculum with young people’s lifeworlds (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Thomson, 2002) whilst also considering the particular affordances and limitations of ‘becoming somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) in ‘the north’, and the complexities of making a life in changing times (McLeod & Yates, 2006). The project also emphasised findings of complementary studies into middle schooling which suggest that, in order to extend ‘disadvantaged’ students’ educational and life chances, schools need not only to improve middle school students’ attendance and engagement with schooling, they also need to enable students to succeed according to mainstream measures of success which allow them to progress along desired educational and vocational pathways (e.g. Gore & Ladwig, 2006; Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard, 2007; Luke et al., 2003).

Teachers were invited to explore, in their specific subject areas, what was and what wasn’t working for their students’ learning. The research team was keen to understand and respect the complexity of teachers’ work, its connections with their identities and histories, and their experiences of teaching in this particular region. To this end, early in the project we invited them to talk about and then write a professional auto-biography and to bring and discuss artefacts selected or made by themselves and their students that symbolised their particular school community ‘in the north’. We also met regularly with teachers in Research Roundtables (Brennan, White, & Owen, 2001) where teachers discussed related reading, their classroom research and issues they faced in their work, and we interviewed each teacher several times about their experiences of researching and teaching in their school. In this way we hoped to contribute to a much-needed body of research that ‘explores the complex embeddings and mediations of teaching and learning within cultures and discourses, systems and everyday practice’ (Luke, 2006, p. 3).

As we listened to teachers we were struck both by what they did say about their work and also by what was missing. We noted their insistence on ‘relationships’ with students, for example, as a primary framing for their work as teachers. There was also talk about structural and policy matters that were beyond their control but which affected their practice. However, teachers were unlikely to talk about pedagogy unless pressed. Invitations to talk about teaching, curriculum design, assessment or reflective practice seemed to fall flat. The RPiN project focused on re-designing pedagogy yet the teachers, it appeared, were on some other trajectory which employed different discourses and practices. In what follows we draw on the work of feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith and Foucaultian-informed approaches to critical discourse analysis to locate teachers’ insistence on ‘caring relationships’ and the backgrounding of pedagogical labour.
Critically re-visiting a reform project which he undertook in collaboration with teachers from an urban school in the nineties in the US, Carlson (2005, p. 42) argues:

… progressives will need to do battle on a number of different fronts simultaneously in any sustained movement for democratic educational renewal. They must do battle against corporate discourses of high-stakes testing and quantification of quality, disciplinary discourses of surveillance, policy and therapy, and deficit models of urban youth.

Carlson identifies different ‘discursive economies’ that circulate within public education and which impact on what happens to reform within institutions and over time. He explains that ‘democratic progressive language’, introduced to the teachers by the academic researchers, ‘never really established itself as a viable discourse in the everyday world of school’ (Carlson, 2005, p. 30), where it was ‘drowned out’ both by the wider transnational discourses surrounding standards and education and poor urban youth and by the immediate pragmatic tasks required of teachers such as improving test scores. Writing in Australia, as researchers similarly committed to equity through school reform, we are struck by the significant echoes with our own experience. Carlson (2005, p. 22) summarises the problem:

… transnational capitalism plays an ever-increasing role in establishing the discursive parameters for educational policy and practice, and public schools (particularly urban public schools) are being called upon to assume a heightened role in the surveillance, policing and regulation of ‘problem youth’.

This analysis is akin to Smith’s (2005, p. 165) notion of ‘ruling relations’ wherein our lives are organised and regulated often through transnational discourses, such as corporatism or managerialism, instantiated in particular kinds of textual practices – such as standardised tests or student reports. In these times, dominant discourses may overwhelm the professional knowledges and ways of speaking of teachers working in disadvantaged schools, such that even in a project focusing on pedagogy, conversation about pedagogy becomes elusive.

**Struggling for (pedagogical) words**

While the research team had introduced, and teachers brought with them, a range of theoretical resources for thinking about middle school pedagogies, teachers did not eagerly appropriate terms such as ‘productive pedagogies’ (Hayes et al., 2006) for example, nor even the perhaps more familiar ‘negotiating the curriculum’ (Boomer, Lester, Onore, & Cook, 1992). From the outset teachers talked and wrote about the primacy of relationships with students in how they understood their work, insisting that improving their students’ learning was contingent upon getting relationships right. The dominance of this ‘relationships’ discourse was evident in early Roundtable conversations, teacher biographies and in later reflective interviews. As one teacher wrote, ‘you have to concentrate on building relationships before real learning can commence’.

In this respect, our study replicates findings of other studies of teachers’ professional identities and work in contexts of school reform. For example, Lasky’s (2005) study of teachers’ professional identities in a context of secondary school reform found that ‘for all teachers interviewed, trusting, respectful relationships with their high school students were considered as a prerequisite for learning to occur’ (p. 907). In that study, as in ours, building relationships with students was perceived by
teachers to establish ‘connections’ with their students which in turn were seen as being central both to increasing student interest in the subjects being taught, and to engaging students who were at risk of leaving school or failing. Similarly, Gore, Williams and Ladwig’s (2006) study of early-career teachers developing perceptions of their work in middle schooling contexts found little emphasis on the processes of teaching and learning. Rather, administrative tasks and developing relationships with students were seen as central to teachers’ work.

Accompanying teachers’ insistence on good personal relationships with students as central to improving pedagogy was a backgrounding of other aspects of their pedagogical work. We understand teachers’ pedagogical work as involving expert subject knowledge, and the practices of curriculum and activity design, modelling, explanation, evaluation and feedback, and so on (Comber, 2006). Teachers, however, did not tend to volunteer accounts of such practices and indeed, in some cases, there even appeared to be a disinclination to define and investigate pedagogy (see also Sellar & Cormack, in press 2009) or to pursue the concept of ‘educative relationships’ (following Boomer, 1999) which we brought to the table. This raises questions for us about the cultures and ethos of these schools, including the effects they have on teacher professional identities. However, since these ways of talking were the norm beyond individual schools, it also raises more profound questions about how wider contemporary educational discourses affect ways in which teachers understand themselves and their work. In Foucault’s terms, key questions emerge. What can be talked about now in school staff rooms and meetings? What must be talked about, written about and communicated? We are particularly interested in how such discourses play out in schools located in low socio-economic communities.

The extent to which teachers downplay what we saw as their pedagogical work may relate to the recent reorganisation of that work, as we go on to discuss. An indication of how this phenomenon manifested itself emerges in the following transcript where a teacher reflects on his action research:

We’re still halfway through the unit. We started off continuing on from previous work that we did on imagery analysis and those sorts of things, and representation, and we moved onto popular culture, and looked at music videos, those sorts of things. We did some analysis in class, and then the students presented their own video clip and analysis on the board to the class. Most of that went all right … So then we went on to a little assignment about themselves, analysing popular culture and what represents different people and what music they’re into, and they did a bit of analysis on themselves, what’s important to them; what they like, what they do in their everyday lives, and what type of people they are … Then that was sort of a formative piece to lead into the major assignments, which is we’re looking at youth culture and identity, and what they are doing in using either skills that they already have, or knowledge they already have, bringing in what they’re interested in, and being able to tell a story, whether it be a story or PowerPoint, or poetry or whatever, some sort of way of getting across what it means to be a young person, …

The logic in this and many other accounts implies a linear trajectory (we did x, then we did y), giving a sense of relentless moving forward across time ‘doing things’ in class. Often, however, in the teacher interviews, there was a lack of specificity about their pedagogical or educative goals, and sometimes little about what would be assessed and how (cf. Hayes, 2003). It is not that responsive and inclusive pedagogy has not been designed and implemented here. On the contrary, in terms of the project’s stated principles, this teacher’s unit of work explicitly connects with young people’s out-of-school lives and interests; their cultural assets or funds of knowledge.
Here we simply want to draw attention to how his own pedagogical work disappears in his description of ‘what we did’, or his retelling of the ‘default script’ of his classroom (Johnston & Hayes, 2008). The processes of his own labour in designing and enacting the curriculum, and his explicit scaffolding guidance and dialogue with and feedback to students, becomes invisible in his account even though this was the stated intent of the project as signaled in the title, ‘Reinvigorating middle years pedagogy in ‘rustbelt’ secondary schools’. This may be to some degree explained by the research assistant’s original invitation ‘to talk about the project you did, your unit of work, and what you did and how it went’. However this kind of description of teachers’ inquiries into their own pedagogy was typical, not exceptional.

In this case, the teacher calls on his own experience as a ‘local’ and as a graduate of a school in the north to make connections with his students. So making the curriculum relevant and understanding students’ lifeworlds perhaps presented less of a challenge to him than to some of his peers. Yet this teacher, along with most of his peers, tended to describe his work in terms of procedural concerns and personal relationships. He gave a sense of students working with him to move through the curriculum unit, talked about what he spent time on, and how different students responded. However, when asked whether he had made any observations about students’ learning, he asked the research assistant to clarify the question.

RA: So overall so far, what observations would you make about their learning, how they’re learning or what they’re learning?
Teacher: What do you mean?
RA: Do they seem more engaged, or … any observations about learning or engagement, or participation, or attendance?
Teacher: I guess for the most part it hasn’t been a huge and really noticeable difference, because I’ve always had a certain level of participation. Even if they didn’t like the work, I could always sort of relate to the kids and get by, and sort of get across why they have to do it, and do it, and get through it, but I guess it’s been a little bit more positive attitude, I guess. I still have certain people not willing to go the extra step and do the work, but the difference is I haven’t got the negative response that I get from some of the other work that we do, like when we did a bit more classical literature and stuff like that, we got the negative responses, ‘This is boring. Why are we doing this? This is irrelevant,’ sort of thing.

Our objective here is not to judge the way teachers account for their pedagogy, but to ask what is going on when teachers talk about their work in such ways and to consider the conditions in which this arises and the possible consequences. At a time when questions about teacher professional standards and the quality of teaching are in the foreground of federal policy, it is of concern that teachers downplay their professional knowledge and discretionary judgment and practice with respect to student learning.

It may be, in Dorothy Smith’s terms, that what is going on in the teacher interviews is a form of institutional ‘capture’, where the researcher and the teachers participate in particular ways of talking about schooling that constitutes these young people as reluctant and needy, and teachers’ work as about ‘doing activities’ and forming conducive social relationships. These storylines certainly pervade the data and perhaps necessarily so, but they also edge out different possible accounts of what teachers are accomplishing and how they do it. In what follows, we can see teachers concerns with discipline, both its therapeutic and punitive senses (following Carlson, 2005), in their insistence on the development of positive personal relationships and the concerns with student behavior management.
Corporate discourse and the bureaucratisation of teachers’ work

Along with the expressed imperative to build positive personal relationships with their students, teachers also reported that they were experiencing changes in their daily work and many of these were connected with corporate discourse and increasingly bureaucratic requirements. They reported needing to deal with ‘bureaucracy and administrative issues’ and ‘meaningless bullshit destined for a cupboard in someone’s office’. Another teacher deplored the ‘decaying state system’ of education, aware that demands on teachers in workplaces were related to broader educational developments, such as the marketisation of schooling. That is, many of the teachers spoke of ways in which their work was shaped by the corporate discourses of ‘reform’ and ‘quality’ associated with standardised testing, the quantification of ‘quality’, and the disciplinary discourses of surveillance and policing which resulted in their having to complete and lodge endless forms and records (Carlson, 2005). This textually mediated regulation of teachers’ work is part of wider transnational moves which reorganise the work of professionals as noted by Smith (2005). Reforms to promote greater accountability and productivity in the human services professions (nursing, social work, education) are proliferating across post-industrialised western nations, with some commentators identifying a reform agenda characterised by an increasingly managerialist discourse (Comber, 1997a; Griffith & Andre-Bechely, 2008; Rankin & Campbell, 2006). Smith (2005) explains that professional work is increasingly mediated by attempts to classify and measure responsibilities associated with specific fields.

While some teachers reported that policy changes did not impact directly on their work (which is interesting in its own right), most spoke of their ‘autonomy being eroded’, not being ‘given time or training to deal with expectations’, a ‘lack of PD on how to implement policy’, ‘more paperwork’, ‘more contact time’ and pressure to raise school card and disability benchmarks. Some reported that ‘constant change in curriculum documents creates more work and does not result in any improvements in the classroom’, and that teachers endure ‘new policies with no time to learn about them or explore their use’; ‘cutting back of resources and the introduction of different policy guidelines’; the ‘push for us, faculty by faculty, to line up our curriculum with frameworks, and make that visible’; and ‘too much paperwork especially at Stage 2 level, as though SSABSA [Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia] disregards our professional judgement’. Together such reports tell a story of considerable changes to teachers’ work practices and the related stress they experience. Worrying themes in their comments are about more and less; doing more with less support and fewer resources (see also Zipin, 2002), and doing more without a sense of purpose or worthwhile outcome as ‘time, precious time, that could be spent in reflecting and observing and creating’ instead is spent on ‘standardised column reporting’.

Below we consider one extended conversation between teachers during a Roundtable discussion to examine what this looks like in the everyday/everynight (Smith, 1995) of teachers’ working lives as the ‘network of micro-technologies and apparatuses of control’ that come with corporate discourses are brought into play, making it ‘difficult for teachers to resist or to carve out an oppositional discourse and space’ (Carlson, 2005, p. 1). A senior teacher in a small discussion group explains that she has been analysing student reports from first term and announces that, in the context of state-wide policy, ‘our IT person has developed a software program called
RAT (Rapid Access Terminal)’ with the aim of assisting teachers to report on student learning outcomes. From there a discussion ensues that reveals how the professional practice of writing reports about student learning and achievement is impacted by new reporting requirements and templates.

The teacher first notes that while she understands that ‘assessment processes promote learning’, directives from the state education department affect not only what can be said about students, and how it can be said, but also the ways in which teachers experience the changing practices of assessing and reporting on student achievement. For this teacher, the new system has extended into her life outside school and added significant levels of responsibility and stress for several months at a time:

I’ve been up to 12 o’clock last night writing outcomes-based report libraries for my faculty …
In the last Roundtable we had here, I had just read 900 reports, reviewing them and I was just a screaming wreck.

Her explanation of some of the constraints that now surround the production of reports about students’ learning illustrate the ways in which translocal texts – the forms and reports that require completion – work locally to affect teachers’ work (Smith, 2005).

Teacher 1: … the word has come down from on high, from DECS [Department of Education and Children’s Services], that we are not, we are only to report positively, so we are not to make negative reports, so …
Researcher: About how English is in your school?
Teacher 1: Well about how anything is.
Teacher 2: About learning?
Teacher 1: Yes.
Teacher 2: So it all has to be constructed as ‘improved with’ or …
Teacher 1: No, not even that. We’re being given all sorts of rules about we have to write in the past tense, there are to be no joining words, there are to be no pronouns used.

The teacher argues that policy texts and directives produced by the state-wide education department filter down into schools, and also mediate and shape the texts provided to teachers at the micro level of the school, guiding them to produce yet further texts that report on student achievement in documents that enter the public domain. These latter texts in turn mediate information to parents and others outside the school about students’ achievements at school. However, these locally produced texts also organise teachers’ work in particular ways, sometimes changing teachers’ professional practices in unpredictable ways and producing flow-on effects in their relationships with students and parents. At the same time, changing rules about what can and cannot be said in reports can cause teachers to experience a diminished sense of agency and a challenge to what they hold to be ethical and responsible professional practice.

Teacher 1: … and so we had a discussion at the curriculum and policy committee the other night … an AP [Assistant Principal] tentatively said ‘Look, I’d actually like to be able to make some subjective comments here in my report about my relationship with the student and how I appreciate his humour, or whatever it might be’, and the reaction is, ‘Well, no, that’s dangerous, that could come back and bite you, basically’. You can only say things like ‘So and so (I mean you have a name) has demonstrated skill in responding to texts of various types’. It’s a clinical, it’s a dead report.
Teacher 2: And it tells parents nothing.

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Teacher 1: … parents aren’t going to understand that, it’s just insane, and because they don’t come in to talk to us, and because we’re presenting gobbledy-gook like that …

This teacher goes on to explain how her school’s attempt to streamline the new reporting process using the RAT reporting system and software had, in effect, not only been frustrating because of its apparent purposelessness, but also had added greatly to her work. For example, in order to implement the computerised system of outcomes-based ‘libraries of comments’, subject coordinators first needed to develop outcomes-based ‘report libraries’ which are descriptors of student performance that can be added to drop-down menus on the computer software for teachers to draw on when reporting on particular students:

… you see as part of this RAT-reporter thing, we’ve been asked to develop our libraries of comments, so you have a drop-down list of A, B, C, D, E, Uc (unclassified), and a comment that goes with that. So if the student has achieve an E or an A, rather than writing a report, we can click on E and up comes that outcome, which …

So, for an outcome in Year 10 English such as ‘Identifies the features of newspaper articles and composes texts which reproduce these characteristics’, a student might demonstrate an outcome graded from A to Uc, where E = ‘has had difficulty in understanding of the features of newspaper articles, struggling to compose texts that include few of those features’. That is, this wording would make up the drop-down menu choice that a teacher would choose from when completing an electronic report card for a student whom they judged to have achieved an E-level standard for that outcome. This practice clearly shapes and constrains what it is possible for individual teachers to say about individual students’ achievements: if it’s not in the ‘library of comments’, it cannot be said.

Getting to this point, however, has required first subject coordinators and then faculty groups to participate in a great deal of textually-mediated work above and beyond their ordinary everyday practice. At the faculty level, libraries of comments or descriptors needed to be developed and then agreed to, and aligned with state-wide policies, then entered onto the electronic database before the report writing could proceed. The instructions for how to go about this, provided to teachers at the school level, suggest the kinds of processes of reorganisation and ‘coordination’ of teachers’ work (Smith, 2005) involved in the exercise.

The above quotes from teachers provide testimonial examples of the corporate discourse of managerialism being instantiated through a set of micro- and computer-based technologies that ‘bring corporate control into the classroom’ (Carlson, 2005, p. 33). The broader translocal changed assessment policy, ‘as discourse’ (Ball, 1993), exerts power over teachers and their relations with students. At the same time, associated locally produced texts like these not only mediate the institutional work of this teacher and her colleagues, they also change teachers’ working practices. They affect both the kinds of opportunities teachers have to carve out an oppositional discourse, and also the kinds of spaces they have in which to make discretionary professional judgments. For example, as the teacher quoted below worked with the new system she felt that she was increasingly being excluded from participation in decision making about what had formerly been her main pedagogical role – assessing and reporting on student learning in ways that are clear to parents and supportive of students’ broad range of achievements.
Teacher: Without blowing my top [in the curriculum and policy meeting], I was just trying to raise obliquely my concerns, and I said something along the lines of it could be the case that I would like to comment on how a student has conducted some peer tutoring in class. Now that would not be one of my outcomes that would have identified, but I would like to comment on that and perhaps it’s a student who’s not achieved particularly well, but has achieved in this… so how do I do that?

She is concerned that the new reporting process, itself mediated and shaped by the locally developed software, has the potential to add to the level of euphemism and ‘gobbledy gook’ about student assessment that is provided to parents. Moreover, the system makes it impossible for teachers to report on those student achievements (such as peer tutoring or ‘the capacity to collaborate with other students’) that they consider to be noteworthy but which have not been pre-determined and specified within libraries of comments subject-coordinators have been instructed to incorporate into the grid of software specifications. Our earlier research indicates that dominant educational discourses, such as those of ‘development’ or ‘outcomes’, impact on what teachers attend to, what aspects of student performance count and how teachers report on students, and they also have long-term impacts on teacher professional judgment and student trajectories (Comber, 1997a, 1997b; Nixon & Comber, 2006). Further, such increased accountability pressures make it more difficult for teachers to create the very positive relationships and trusting learning environments that they maintain are necessary to work productively in schools in challenging circumstances that are subject to mandated reform.

Conclusion

Teachers working in disadvantaged schools describe their work in terms of democratic progressive discourses and disciplinary discourses associated with caring, managing and reporting. Quality mechanisms have resulted in new divisions of labour for teachers. Hence the English coordinator writes the generic report cards, provides the authorised vocabulary, euphemisms, terms of reference, phrasing, correct grammar and spelling, resulting in an escalation and change in her professional work. For other teachers, there is a loss of professional autonomy, responsibility and judgment as the work of reporting increasingly is done through a particular software program which curtails what can be written. The teachers’ work is reorganised and regulated around a new standardised and mediated textual template. The act of reporting fundamentally changes in ways that mean it is less responsive to the differences between students; nor does it allow teachers space to document performance against their customised curriculum designed to connect with their students. In the process, teachers’ attempts to change their practices in the interests of low-achieving students are devalued.

Our discussion in the previous section suggests that a dilemma highlighted earlier – the absence of teacher articulation about pedagogic processes as part of their work – can at least partly be explained by constraints and inducements of prevalent corporate-managerial discourses and associated practices. Still, this does not explain teacher emphasis on ‘caring relationships’, which might also seem outside prevalent discourses of the current policy climate. However, we here recall Carlson’s (2005) Foucaultian observation, noted earlier, that the current policy climate includes disciplinary discourses in both punitive and therapeutic modes. We suggest that the therapeutic disciplinary modality sustains an articulated ethos of caring relationships,
as a residual trace of democratic progressive discourses that once had more room for expression. At the same time, the punitive disciplinary modality converges with corporate-managerial discourses that inhibit teacher senses of agency as designers of curriculum and pedagogy. We thus have teacher discourse about caring relations as prerequisite for teaching-and-learning, yet oddly divorced from thinking about teaching-and-learning as a key process dimension of teachers’ work that builds from this prerequisite. Indeed, the therapeutic ‘caring relationships’ discourse can slip into linkage with another, more punitive element of disciplinary discourse, ‘behaviour management’, which is also often cited by teachers – particular in ‘disadvantaged’ schools, and with ‘deficit’ connotations – as a perhaps not sufficiently achievable prerequisite for learning-proper to begin (see Ovsienko & Zipin, 2007).

Teachers repeatedly told us that designing responsive, inclusive and engaging curriculum and pedagogies was very difficult to maintain in their schools. While many were exhilarated by what they and their students accomplished under the special conditions of the project, some teachers also talked about high levels of exhaustion and the difficulty of sustaining extra energy levels, the extra administration requirements and sometimes extra funds required to make possible the extraordinary work they undertook as participants in the research. Designing and enacting responsive curriculum and pedagogies which are also seen to be rigorous and appropriate within the school takes time; researching it takes more time. And of course in the meantime, teachers’ ordinary work continues: managing badly behaved students (and sometimes their parents), writing reports (including according to new mandated formats and vocabularies), and supporting their colleagues.

Talk about and work on pedagogy needs to be situated and cannot be pursued in isolation from teachers’ everyday working lives. Increasingly it needs to be acknowledged that the room to move – whilst still considerable in Australian schools – is lessening, and that the disciplining of public education by government mandates is taking a toll. Working on curriculum and pedagogical change – the everyday micropolitics of classrooms – is fundamental to improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students, as are teachers’ relationships with students. However for positive equity-based reforms to be sustained requires official authorised support for educators to participate in ongoing research and to engage in serious policy dialogues as a result, within and beyond the school. Making durable positive differences for students long term means making a difference for teachers long term. Teachers’ working conditions need to be altered in order for them to participate in education as scholars and as researchers, not merely as the technicians and implementers of someone else’s curriculum and pedagogy.

Notes

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2 There is more work to be done in the RPiN project on the specificities of ‘context’ that affect the work of teachers in the 10 participating schools (see Thrupp & Lupton, 2006).
References


