

Developing critically reflective teachers in ‘wacky’ times

Barry Down

Murdoch University, Western Australia
b.down@murdoch.edu.au

This paper is about the possibility of reconceptualising and reorganising teacher education. It begins by alluding to the current obsession with testing and standardisation as a means of improving education. A central argument here is that the New Right (neo-liberal and neo-conservative) has manufactured a crisis in education which has had profound consequences for public schools and those who inhabit them, especially in disadvantaged communities. Against this backdrop, the paper considers: (i) the impact of narrowly conceived efforts of government to control teacher’s work through teacher-proof curricula, test driven threats and punitive forms of accountability; (ii) the usefulness of the notion of the critical reflective teacher as an antidote to these draconian policies and practices; and (iii) the implications for teacher education programmes and ongoing teacher development. The paper sets out to tackle two key questions: (i) what kind of teachers do we need in these changing times? and (ii) how do we go about producing them?

‘Wacky’ times

The former Federal Minister of Education, Dr Brendon Nelson spent a considerable amount of time and energy suggesting that our schools, teachers and kids are ‘failing’. In the process of manufacturing a crisis of confidence in public education among parents, teachers and students the former Minister identified a range of causes for this state of affairs including: curriculum fads; new age courses; outcomes based education; political correctness; whole of language reading; and critical literacy. The Minister, in his short time in the job, initiated an unprecedented range of interventions to ‘fix’ the problem such as: standardised paper and pencil testing; back-to-basics; ranking and streaming of students; common sense reporting; prescriptive syllabus and texts; nationally controlled curriculum and examinations; and if all else failed withholding funds.

Neo-conservative commentators such as Kevin Donnelly (2004) claim the problem is “unresponsive bureaucracies, left-wing education academics and teacher unions more concerned with ideology than supporting what happens in the classroom” (p.2). In his treatise entitled “Why our schools are failing”, Donnelly suggests that these groups have conspired to “reduce standards and impose a politically correct, mediocre view of education on our schools” (p.16).¹

To suggest that teachers who do not share his views are concerned with ideology and are responsible for lowering educational standards is at best mischievous. The solution, he believes, is to mimic those systems of education that manage to perform well on international standardised tests. For Donnelly, this means:

- adopting a strong, discipline-based approach to school subjects (especially maths and science);
- enforcing system accountability and explicit rewards and sanctions (identify under-performing schools and reward successful teachers);
- defining clear educational standards (not outcomes, as is the case in Australia) linked to textbooks, teacher training and classroom resources;
- having a greater time on task in the classroom and an emphasis on formal teaching;
- having regular testing and high risk examinations; and

¹ Interestingly, Donnelly’s own work was commissioned by the Menzies Research Centre (<http://www.mrcld.org.au>), a right wing think tank committed to the values of free enterprise, competition and individualism. A cursory glance at the website shows links to like minded groups such as the H.R.Nicholas Society, The Adam Smith Institute, The Institute for Private Enterprise and the Liberal Party to name a few.

- providing a differentiated curriculum and a range of school pathways (recognising that students have different abilities, interest and post-school destination) (p.179).

Susan Meier (2002) in her book *In Schools We Trust* argues that the dominant attitude towards schooling reflected in these simplistic approaches is fundamentally a new level of distrust in teachers' judgements and in principals, parents and local communities. Furthermore, she says "We don't trust the public school system ... Nor do we trust in the extraordinary human penchant for learning itself" (p.2). Meier goes on to say:

But whatever the origins, social distrust plays itself out in education in the form of draconian attempts to "restore accountability" through standardized schooling and increasing bureaucratization. The tragedy of this approach is that it undermines what I think is the best way to make schools trustworthy and raise standards. Standardization and bureaucratization fuel the very distrust they are aimed to cure (p.2).

In her view, the "quasi science of testing" (p.6) which is driving the current policy agenda is highly dubious:

Resorting to flawed standardized testing, whose only virtue seems to be its capacity to enable us to pretend we can rank everyone (or sort everyone) precisely and objectively, is both unnecessary and counterproductive We need, in short, standards in terms of both means and ends, not standardization" (pp.135-136).

Despite the evidence which exposes the misleading and disastrous impact of standardised testing, especially on disadvantaged students and their communities, the juggernaut continues in Australia (Emery & Ohanian, 2004; Bracey, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Haney, 2000; Welch, 1996; see also http://susanohanian.org/show_research.html). Commenting on the American *No Child Left Behind Act 2001*, Bracey (2003a) sums it up pretty well:

In the great tradition of "The beatings will continue until morale improves," schools that fail to show AYP [adequate yearly progress] are subject to severe punishment. This ensures that a great deal of time will be spent preparing for the test and that a great deal of attention will be given to the results. Teachers will stifle thought, discussion, and question asking in the name and hope of raising test scores. Call it educational terrorism. I can't think of a better way to destroy the nation (p.16).

In the case of Australia, I have argued elsewhere (Down, 2001) that the "current obsession with mental testing is nothing new and draws on established socio-political discourses that link mental testing with academic excellence, scientific progress, fulfilment of individual potential and parental choice" (p.20). Such discourses have a long association with the eugenics movement and biological explanations of unequal educational outcomes based on race and social hierarchy (Welch, 1996). In short, the standardised testing movement is neither innocent nor apolitical as suggested by its advocates.

Blind to evidence such as this, Donnelly and the former Minister continued their ideologically inspired attack on all levels of education. According to Donnelly (2005), the "wacky curriculum ideas held by those responsible for teacher training" (p.8) is symptomatic of the problem. Too much time, he believes is spent on studying "New-Age curriculum ideas" such as the "new basics", and "autonomous and self-directed learning" advocated by organisations such as the Australian Council of Deans of Education (p.8). These attacks serve not only to mask Donnelly's own ideological fetish for market driven approaches to education but the serious shortcomings of his back to the future vision of education based on rote learning, memorisation, prescriptive syllabus and texts and testing. Commenting on the English experience of the 1990s, Geoff Whitty (1994) summarised the main arguments used by various New Right (neo-liberal and neo-conservative) advocates to undermine teacher education as:

- it places too little emphasis on the learning of subject knowledge
- it places too little emphasis on classroom skills

- it places too much emphasis on education theory
- it emphasises the wrong type of theory
- it emphasises trivia
- it is obsessed with race and inequality
- it is informed by spurious neo-Marxist view of culture
- it produces students who have no respect for traditional values
- it is are too expensive
- it is ineffective (p.5)

What we are witnessing here, as in England, is a broader ideological struggle over the nature, purpose and processes of education in Australia. Ultimately, it is a ‘war of positions’ (Gramsci, 1971) in regard to the kind of values that should shape the nature of individual and social relations in Australian society. On the one hand, New Right politicians and protagonists such as Donnelly want to put education to work as a part of a broader ‘conservative restoration’ (privatisation, centralisation, vocationalisation and differentiation) (Apple, 1996, p. 9) in the interests of capitalism (Chomsky, 1999; Giroux, 2000; Apple, 2001). This means ‘value adding’ to students to ensure that they have the prerequisite knowledge and skills for jobs, no matter what kind, and positive attitudes to the world of work. In short, students should leave school job ready, and ‘fit for purpose’ (Down, 2004). Anthony Welch (1996) argues that the back-to-basics proponents are mounting “a moral-political campaign to wrest control of society from supporters of tolerance, difference and democratic self-expression and return it to those who hanker for a more monolithic, certain and authoritarian world” (p.101). In a similar vein, Joe Kincheloe (2000) claims we are witnessing the cultivation of “more social obedience and commonness of purpose and less democracy and liberty” (p.104).

On the other hand, there are many teachers and parents who remain committed to an alternative set of principles and values embedded in the critical-democratic tradition of education (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998; Shor, 1987, 1992). For them, education is a vehicle for social change based on the values of economic and social justice and equity, compassion, collective solidarity, democratic participation and civic responsibility. The question becomes, then, whether teachers and teacher educators should inculcate students into the dominant ways of looking at the world or whether they should be taught to question the way things are with a view to changing it? (Shor, 1992; Hursh & Ross, 2000; Kincheloe, 2001).

For me, there are two fundamental questions emerging from this broader ideological struggle:

- What kind of teachers do we need in these times? and
- How do we go about producing them?

In tackling these questions I want to do a number of things in this paper:

- To engage in some critique of what I see happening to teachers’ work today;
- To suggest how we might reconceptualise teacher education in more socially just and critical-democratic ways for the benefit of all students, not only the privileged few; and
- To examine the implications for teacher education programmes and ongoing teacher development.

What’s happening to teachers’ work?

To begin, I want to argue that teachers’ work can only begin to make sense in the context of the broader set of forces - neo-liberalism, economic restructuring and new managerialism – that currently impacting on the daily work and lives of teachers (O’Brien & Down, 2002; Smyth, 2001a). Drawing on Gale and Densmore (2003) this means unpacking the following themes:

- The influence of the market in education, its anti-democratic agenda, and the need for teachers to think and act differently if the individual and collective futures of all students are to be rescued;

- The continued although changed influence of government and institutions in the education marketplace, characterized by increased control at the same time as reduced responsibility;
- The need for teachers to be cognizant of the 'big picture' informing education, to engage with it and to connect this with local community action; and
- The need for teachers and schools to more fully engage with their communities in radical democratic ways (p.3).

In this task, my colleague John Smyth (2001a) summarises the impact of the market on education in the following way:

The role and function of education is undergoing dramatic change in response to these [global restructuring] economic imperatives. The notion of a broad liberal education is struggling for its survival in a context of instrumentalism and technocratic rationality where the catchwords are "vocationalism," "skills formation," "privatization," "commodification," and "managerialism." In circumstances like these, education 'comes under the gun' because it is simultaneously blamed for the economic crisis, while it is being held out as the means to economic salvation – if only a narrow, mechanistic view of education is embraced. (p.37)

He (2001a) goes on to describe how these tendencies have resulted in policy initiatives that:

- Require teachers to work within more rigidly defined policy frameworks and guidelines, of one kind or another;
- Place greater emphasis on determining the worth of teaching in terms of measurable outcomes;
- Supposedly make teachers more accountable by linking outcomes to the actions and activities of individual teachers, classrooms, and schools;
- Move teachers and schools in the direction of processes that are more appropriate to those of the corporate and industrial sector – performance appraisal, curriculum audits, quality assurance, and the like;
- Preach the virtues of education and schooling as being no different than any other commodity – to be measured and calibrated according to quality standards; packaged and delivered to targeted audiences; and haggled over in the artificially constructed 'user-pays' marketplace of education. (p.39)

The upshot of these policies is that teachers are being construed as technicians/civil servants who are responsible and increasingly accountable for implementing policies and practices defined by external agencies (eg the OECD, IMF, and World Bank), governments, and business interests to serve the national interest (narrowly defined as international economic competitiveness) (Taylor, et al., 1997; Thompson, 2002; Apple, 2001). In the process, teachers' work and identities are being restructured and recultured to better reflect the values and behaviour of the corporate world with damaging consequences for teachers and students alike (Smyth, 2001b; Robertson, 2000; Woods et al., 1997).

In the case of new managerialism, teachers are telling us a number of things: that market reforms are not only inappropriate but ineffective in improving student learning; their work is intensifying; insecurity and stress are increasing; and poor teacher morale pervades their school (O'Brien & Down, 2002). As for performance management regimes, teachers are also saying that these are largely ineffective in bringing about classroom and school level change or enhanced professional learning (Down, Hogan & Chadbourne, 1999, 2000). The salient lesson is the way in which teachers actively "subvert, circumvent, and reinscribe" (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p.5) managerial practices to maintain some control over their work and preserve their deeply held pedagogical theories and values. Teachers themselves, describe how genuine change "in the classroom lies within and through teachers' professional communities: learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment and change" (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993, cited in Down, Hogan & Chadbourne, 2000, p. 221). It is against this backdrop, that I would like to now consider the question of what kind of teachers do we need in these times?

Critically reflective teachers

Given the damaging impact of New Right policies and practices on our public schools and those who inhabit them, especially in disadvantaged communities, there is an urgent need to reconceptualise what constitutes quality teaching. For me, it means producing teachers who are willing and prepared to interrupt existing patterns and processes of schooling with a view to transforming them. It involves a commitment to pursuing classroom practice that is:

- Grounded in the lives of our students;
- Critical;
- Multicultural;
- Anti-racist, pro-justice;
- Participatory, experiential;
- Hopeful, visionary;
- Activist;
- Academically rigorous; and
- Culturally and linguistically sensitive (Bigelow, et al., 2006, p.7; see also Shor 1992; Smyth, 2000).

In developing this vision of teaching, critically reflective practice provides us with some important principles, guidelines and strategies in (re)imagining teachers' work in more progressive and socially just ways. According to Roger Simon (1988), critically reflective practice is concerned with the moral question of "why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them" (p.2). It involves a critique of existing practices for the purpose of taking action to improve student learning for the benefit of all students, not only the privileged few. In this perspective, teachers and teacher educators become "knowledge workers" (as opposed to technicians/civil servants) who "research, interpret, expose embedded values and political interest, and produce their own knowledge" (Kincheloe, 2001, p.241).

Elsewhere (Down & Hogan, 2000) I have used Stephen Brookfield's (1994) definition of critical reflection which involves three interrelated processes:

- The experience of questioning and then replacing or reframing an assumption, or assumptive cluster, which is unquestioningly accepted as representing dominant common sense by a majority;
- The experience of taking a perspective on social and political structures, or on personal and collective actions, which is strongly alternative to that held by a majority; and
- The experience of studying the ways in which ideas, and their representations in actions and structures are accepted as self-evident renderings of the 'natural' state of affairs (p.14).

Brookfield (1995) goes on to say that that critical reflection has two distinctive purposes:

- To understand how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interaction; and
- To question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interest (p.8).

In a similar way, Carr and Kemmis (1983) argue that:

Teachers 'become critical' – not in the sense that they become negativistic or complaining, but in the sense that they gather their intellectual and strategic capacities, focus them on a particular issue and engage them in critical examination of practice through the 'project' (p.43).

In developing a socially critical approach to teaching and learning there are a range of perspectives that are helpful in illuminating the ethical and political dimensions of teachers' work. In my own work, I have found the following set of ideas to be helpful:

- Teachers need to redefine their roles as “engaged and transformative intellectuals who combine vision, conception, and practice” (Giroux, 1996; Giroux & McLaren, 1986).
- Good teaching is “scholarly and intellectual” (Hilty, 1996).
- “The expert is no longer someone who has arrived, who already knows, but one who is continuously engaged in educative experiences” (Gitlin, 1996, p.114).
- “[Good teachers] understand that questions of learning cannot be separated from questions of equity, justice and even oppression” (Gitlin, 1996, p.116).
- “Education is irrevocably linked to politics and power (who gets what, when and how)” (Harnett & Carr, 1995, p.41).
- Understanding diversity (cultural diversity, multilingualism, sexism and sexuality, racism, handicapism, classism, religious differences and rural/urban differences) is an integral part of learning to be a teacher (Hatton, 1996).
- “Constructively posing questions about teaching and learning represents the essence of being a professional educator and should not be construed as an organisationally disruptive act” (Grimmet, 1995, p.118).
- Producing reflective practitioners that can make sense of their professional thinking and action (technically, practically and politically) (Adler, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1987; Smyth, 1989, 2000; Yost, et al., 2000).
- Teachers need to be explicit about their own ethical, moral and political assumptions about education, curriculum and teaching (Hursh, 1995, p.110, Tom, 1997, p.97).
- Teaching against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Simon, 1992).

For many pre-service and in-service teachers these ideas are often at odds with their pre-conceived assumptions about teaching and learning. This should be hardly surprising given that many of them have not had any experience of questioning school knowledge or life experience. As Ira Shor (1987) explains there are significant “interferences to critical thought” including traditional pedagogies which serve to “control, instruct, monitor, reward and punish students as they acquire appropriate content” (Riveria & Poplin, 1995, p.225). The question students typically ask is, why should we be bothered with all this critical reflection? I just want to teach. According to Brookfield (1995), there are six good reasons why learning critical reflection is important:

- It helps us take informed actions;
- It helps us develop a rationale for practice;
- It helps us avoid self-laceration;
- It grounds us emotionally;
- It enlivens our classrooms; and
- It increases democratic trust (pp.22-26).

The potential benefit of critical reflection is summarised well by one experienced classroom teacher:

The most important aspect for me in conducting this research was that I was truly able to confront myself and my beliefs ... Where I was once [speaking] with an emotional and perhaps irrational voice, I feel I can now speak with more conviction and authority ... With knowledge comes power and peace of mind (Hogan & Down, 1998, p.55).

Above all, critical reflection opens up the spaces where teachers can reclaim some control over the policies and practices that are impacting on their daily work and lives. Importantly, it provides an opportunity to reinsert social justice discourses back into the conversations about schooling (McInerney, 2004). Strategically, this more expansive and activist view of teacher professionalism (Whitty, 1994; Sachs, 2003; Bigelow et al., 2006; Gale & Densmore, 2003) runs counter to the

narrowly conceived efforts of government to control teachers' work through teacher-proof curricula, test driven threats and punitive forms of accountability as envisaged by the former Federal Minister of Education.

Implications for teacher education

Based on the picture of the desired teacher emerging here, teachers who are committed to the principles and values of critical reflection, social justice and emancipatory education, we are now better placed to develop relevant, meaningful and coherent teacher education programmes. In this task, Ginsburg and Lindsay (1995) identify five key questions that require our attention in programme design:

- What messages about education and society do students encounter in the formal and hidden curriculum of teacher education programs?
- Do these messages encourage an acceptance or a critique of existing social relations in communities, nations and the world system?
- Do these messages convey an image of teachers as active or passive, change-orientated or conservative political actors or are teachers represented as apolitical?
- How do students in these programs interpret and anticipate acting in relation to these messages?
- What features of their current and future contexts serve to enable or constrain certain forms of political activity? (p.14)

In tackling these questions, we should not underestimate the obstacles and constraints in interrupting long standing traditions, habits and routines of universities and schools in the current market driven and instrumental policy environment. Furthermore, these tendencies often serve to reinforce the typically conservative nature of teacher education and the dominant "discourse of practicality" (Smith & Zantiotis, 1989, p.110; Beyer, 1987; Adler, 1994; Ginsburg & Lindsay, 1995). As David Hursh (1992) observes the "discourse, practices and organisational structures of teacher education, by reflecting liberal individualism, depoliticizes teaching and schooling and naturalizes current practices" (p.21). Bullough and Gitlin (1991) express similar views when they argue that the training orientation to teacher education:

... maintains a set of structures and embodies a cluster of ideologies which encourage the following: a constricted view of teacher intellect through emphasis on teaching as technique, an extreme form of individualism, teacher dependence on experts, acceptance of hierarchy, a consumer or 'banking' view of teaching and learning (teacher is 'banker; learning is consuming), a limited commitment to the betterment of the educational community and a conservative survivalist mentality among novice teachers (p.38).

Despite these problems and the "glacial speed of change in universities" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p.21) there are good reasons to remain optimistic about the possibilities for mobilising and enacting an alternative set of principles, values and practices in teacher education (Sultana, 1995; Bigelow et al., 2006). As a start, Jesse Goodman (1991, p.74) reminds us that, "our work must be comprehensive In order to have a more meaningful impact upon future teachers, this orientation needs to be the focus of seminars, supervision, foundation courses, field experiences, and methods courses". He warns that without a coordinated effort our effectiveness will be severely limited. In a similar way, Judyth Sachs (2003) urges faculties of education to engage with "the dual tasks of reconceptualising and restructuring at the level of the profession in order to develop an activist teacher professional" (p.61). She argues that restructuring without reconceptualisation will not lead to genuine change in teacher education. According to Sachs "there is a tendency to make adjustments around the edges, change the names of a few units of study, adjust the amount of time spent in schools, and even to introduce a couple of new units so that the institution is seen to respond to government policy pressures" (p.60). Over time, according to Bullough and Gitlin (2001), this can lead to teacher education programmes that are "Disjointed, fragmented, and confusing" for staff and students alike (p.1).

In rethinking teacher education programmes, the principles of critically reflective practice, collaboration, learning communities, teacher research and social justice provide a powerful 'toolkit' of ideas and practices. In my own work with pre-service and in-service teachers I have found the following set of organising ideas especially useful:

- Fostering critically collaborative inquiry into school and social culture by academics, teachers and students (Goodman, 1995; Smyth, 1998, 2000; Bullough & Gitlin, 1991).
- Developing "professional collaborative research enterprises between groups of educators across educational sites" (Grundy, 1996, p.3; Sachs, 2003; Goodlad, 1998).
- Building learning communities wherein beginning teachers and mentors collaborate to analyse and question theories and practices of teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Paris, 1995; Grisham et al, 1999; Fecho, 2000; Hogan & Down, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991).
- Initiating conversations about how people can learn from each other when they work collaboratively on school based projects (Yeatman & Sachs, 1995; Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Hargreaves, 1995).
- Fostering teacher research "as part of an effort to challenge the hegemony of an exclusively university-generated knowledge base for teaching" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p.16; Grimmet, 1995; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Mullen, 2005).

For teacher educators committed to these kinds of ideas, there is a range of useful resources to draw upon. Again, based on my own reading in the field, I have gleaned the following list of pedagogies as a start:

- Connecting emancipatory action research to teacher development (Gore & Zeichner, 1995; Kincheloe, 1993).
- Using life stories/autobiographies as a way of increasing awareness of personal beliefs and preferences about teaching and exposing them to critical examination (Ayers, 1992; Street, 1990).
- Exploring how "teacher personal theorising" influences curriculum decision-making (Ross et al., 1992).
- Linking teachers' stories of action with theories of context (Goodson, 1995; Teitelbraum & Britzman, 1991; Mac an Ghaill, 1996).
- Theorising teachers' practice through critical incident analysis (Tripp, 1993).
- Using case writing as a basis for theorising practice and making teachers' knowledge public (Cherednichenko et al., 1998)
- Recognising and encouraging teachers as agents of knowing and constructors of knowledge (Grimmet, 1995; Valli, 1992).
- Fostering "Depth rather than breadth" (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001, p.xvi).
- Fostering intellectual quality, relevance, supportive classroom environment and the recognition of difference (Gore, 2001).
- Developing "authentic pedagogy": high order thinking; depth of knowledge and understanding; substantive conversation; and connectedness of the lesson to the world (Newmann et al., 1996).
- Engaging in critically reflective practice (describing, informing, confronting and reconstructing) as the cornerstone of teachers' work and socially just schooling (Smyth, 1989, 2000).

In pursuing these kinds of approaches to teacher education it is possible to create what Sultana (1995, p.136) describes as "truly professional action, where teachers engage in educational and other social movements to struggle for a different form of life". Ultimately, the purpose of all this activity is the "restoration of democratic public life" (Meier, 2004, p.6) and the creation of curriculum practices that favour the least advantaged (Connell, 1993).

Conclusion

The ideas outlined in this paper reflect some of my own personal experiences and perspectives about what is possible in teacher education. I have argued that education is under siege from the New Right which seeks to reshape teachers' work and identities in the interests of the market and corporate culture. This is evidenced in a range of policy directions including back-to-basics, standardised paper and pencil testing, teacher proof curriculum, punitive forms of accountability, league tables, and school choice. As a counter to these draconian policies and practices, I have suggested an alternative set of principles and values based on the critical-democratic tradition of Dewey, Freire, and Shor among others. In mapping out what this might look like, I have suggested how critically reflective practice and particular pedagogies such as emancipatory action research, critical incident analysis, case writing, life stories/autobiographies, personal-practical theorising and authentic pedagogy can provide a way forward. Together these approaches to teacher education can help us to illuminate the ethical and political dimensions of teachers' work and create more socially just forms of teacher education. Freire (1999) provides a final word of encouragement when he says "One of the tasks of the progressive educator, ... is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do" (p.9).

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