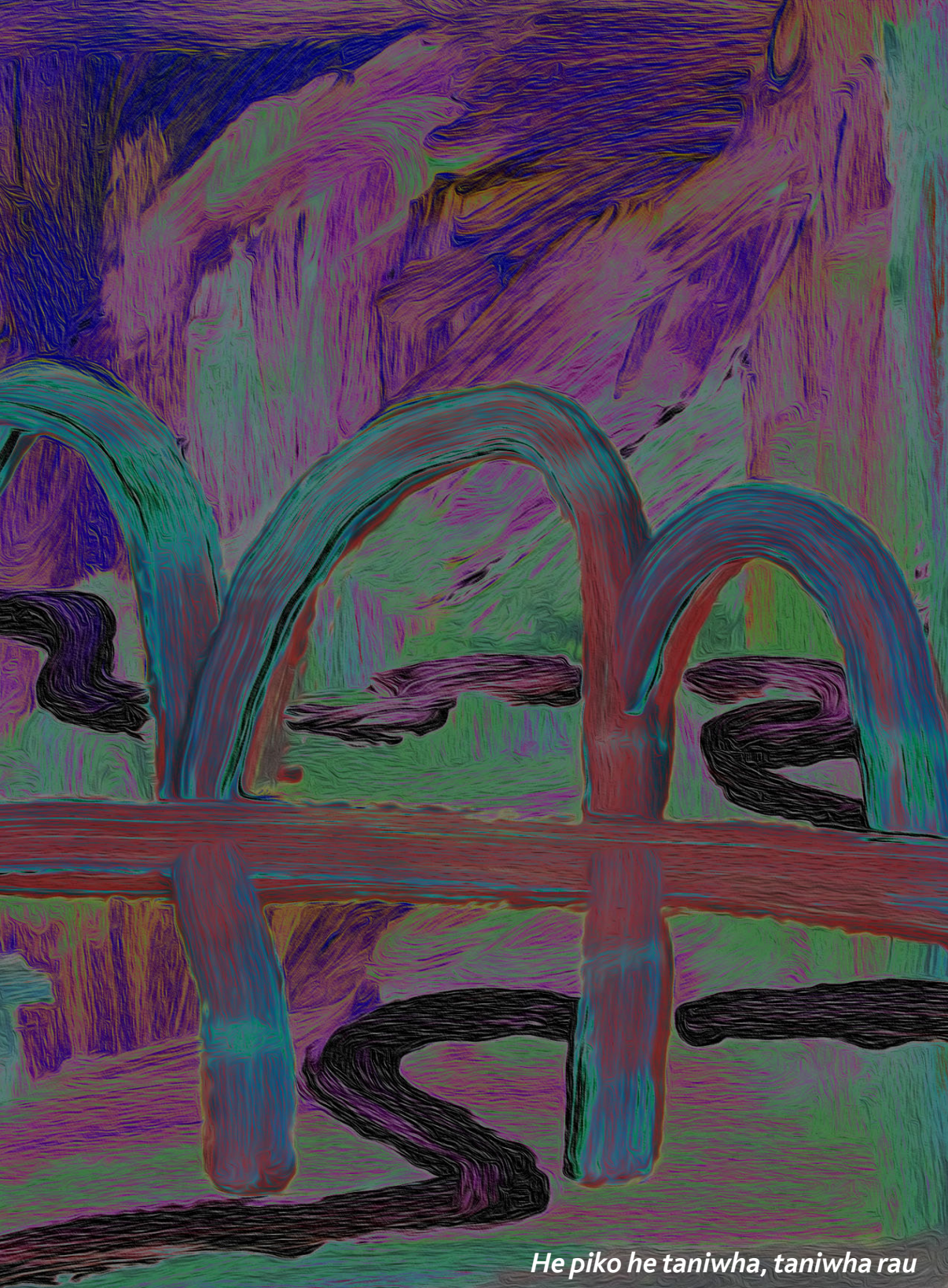




Wilf Malcolm Institute
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Te Pūtahi Rangahau Mātauranga o Wilf Malcolm
THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO

Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato



He piko he taniwha, taniwha rau

Special
20th
Anniversary
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2015

TE KURA TOI TANGATA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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Policy research and ‘damaged teachers’: Towards an epistemologically respectful paradigmⁱ

John Smyth

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Abstract

This paper canvasses one of the most debilitating issues currently disfiguring schools—the absent voices of teachers in the policy reform of schooling. This is a phenomenon that has afflicted schooling around the world for more than three decades, and it is not without effects. The escalating levels of student disaffection, alienation, violence, disengagement and ‘dropping out’ are not unconnected to the marginalisation of teachers and the disrespectful and distrustful ways in which they have been treated by policy makers, politicians and a largely hostile media. What is advanced in its place in this paper is a way of conducting research that restores trust through acknowledging and celebrating the distinctive repertoires of knowledge teachers and students possess, and points to the way in which a more respectful policy paradigm might be re-invented.

Introduction

In this paper, I want to make and pursue two rather straightforward points. Firstly, that the neo-liberal educational reform project around the world has mostly had a damaging effect on teachers, despite official denials to the contrary (Smyth, 2003). I will explain how and why as the paper unfolds. Secondly, many of us in the educational research community have been interested in, indeed committed to, obtaining a deeper understanding of these damaging effects, and in doing so we have resorted to research approaches that we hope are not only informative but that bring with them a more democratic agenda of enabling schools and their communities to engage in some rejuvenation and restoration. This is to acknowledge Lather’s (1998) point that out of “a praxis of stuck places” it is possible to engage in “working the ruins” (p. 488) of the damage to teachers’ work in a way that “self-renewal follows” (Woods & Carlyle, 2002, p. 169). By engaging teachers and schools with qualitative

ⁱ This paper was undertaken as part of a project funded through a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council on the topic “On Becoming a Middle School Teacher; Reclaiming the Wasteland of the Middle Years”. The scholarly work in this paper was explicitly attributable to the multiple institutional positions held by the author as indicated in the institutional by-line.



and socially critical approaches to research, I hope to have opened up at least some modicum of a possibility of enabling them to advance on alternative and counter hegemonic approaches to school and classroom reform. The intent, through qualitative research, is to enable teachers to see that there are systematic ways of exploring how educational policy is working on them, whose interests are being served, how to resist the worst effects of ill-informed policy, and how to adapt and appropriate aspects of policy that can be made to work toward more educative and socially just ends in most western countries, including New Zealand.

As with any attempt to provide clarity in a context of confusion, there is always a risk of oversimplification, and the present attempt is not immune from that danger. The risk, while still real, seems nevertheless worthwhile especially given the tortuous twists, obfuscations, half-truths, misinformation and downright lies behind much of what passes as educational policy.

The major category I want to invoke in pursuit of my argument is one that is increasingly being used within the discourses of youth culture as a way of explaining increasing levels of hostility, alienation and disaffection being experienced and displayed by young people in schools, precipitating into the escalating phenomenon of ‘dropping out’ of school, or simply leaving early. Hemmings (2003) refers to this as a deepening “crisis of respect” (p. 417)—a kind of collapse in the moral order (especially within high schools), as trust is severely eroded between “competent teachers and their students” (p. 417). What happens in such circumstances has scant regard for the relational conditions and purposes upon which schooling is fundamentally dependent. Relationships are degraded to the point where the unequivocal message being given to students in a variety of ways, is that those in authority simply don’t care. In such circumstances, it becomes “almost impossible to negotiate a moral contract in an educational enterprise aimed at producing thoughtful citizens and decent human beings” (Hemmings, 2003, p. 417).

What research by Hemmings (2002, 2003) and others is increasingly showing is that at the level of young people, schools are places in which relationships count, and in which students are continually making “discourse-driven adaptations” (2002, p. 305). Hostility is one manifestation of an active and adaptive response to a “discourse of disrespect” (Hemmings, 2002, p. 305) that accompanies the exercise of power over young lives.

The purpose behind this short excursion into the relational nature of what goes on inside schools at the level of what has been colourfully labelled the “underlife” (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995, p. 445), or the “subjugated perspective” (Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995, p. 410) of students, is to highlight the relevant point that significant cultural tensions are brought into existence when there is a lack of respect within schools. Respect applies not only to students but equally to teachers, their professional lives, and how they interpret and enact the task of teaching. Respect is something that teachers know they have to earn daily in the way in which they treat their students. But respect is also an important quality that has to palpably exist along an axis from teachers to school leaders and educational policy makers.

A number of commentators have described the intent that lies behind a range of policy reforms that have been imposed upon schools over the past couple of decades. Ball (1990), for example, describes them as constituting a “discourse of derision” (p. 22) or, to put it most simply, capturing the language by which schools will be spoken about in exclusionary terms and labelling anything else as unprofessional, out-of-date or simply irrelevant or redundant. Codd (1999) calls this a “culture of distrust” (p. 45):

It is not that people have chosen to abandon their trust in each other, but rather, that many of the policies that frame their educational practices have been predicated on the assumption that people are primarily motivated by self-interest and therefore cannot be trusted to serve the common good. (p. 45)

While it is true to speak in terms of an ascendancy or dominant perspective that prevails, it is probably more accurate to conceive of a situation characterised by parallel discourses. As Sinclair (1996) notes there is a policy hegemony of managerialism, evaluation, review and accountability, which amount to what might be termed “synthetic” discourses (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 66). When posited in schools, these appear as interloper, intrusive, authoritarian and, in the end, muscular discourses. These dominant discourses have to be contrasted and counter-posed with the more “authentic discourses” (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 141) of schools and teachers—ones that sound more ordinary, tentative, provisional, idiosyncratic, and that are framed and expressed in vernacular or indigenous forms. These forms are more lifelike, colloquial, storied, uplifting and celebratory of the purposes and successes of what goes on inside of schools.

As I have argued elsewhere (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998), we have to break the hold of the synthetic discourses and allow a re-discovery of what Sinclair (1996) calls a “discourse of [moral] purpose” (p. 241), rather than endorsing a discourse of “frozen mission statements” (p. 241), inert goals, lifeless performance indicators, emotional emptiness and fearful mechanical efficiency regimes. The starting point has to be a preparedness to stand up to this living of a policy fantasy; this charade of official policy; this living of a divided life—and show how to move beyond stifling constraints.

A helpful metaphor is to think in terms of countering those policies that would have teachers construct a “scripted classroom” (Gutierrez, Larson, & Kreuter, 1995, p. 410)—one in which they are hedged in and become complicit in processes that control and discipline them through testing, accountability, benchmarks, standards, outcomes, and the like, in which the work of teaching is designated according to pacted scripts. As Macedo (1993) put it, policy regimes that construct teachers in this way produce a form of “literacy for stupidification” (p. 193).

In the following section I want to argue that: teachers have largely been excluded from educational policy formulation; they have had policy that is distant and unconnected imposed upon them; and they have been treated in distrustful ways by policy that is hostile to them.

How teachers' work is being damaged

The contemporary policy assault on teachers through various forms of “coercive accountability” (Shore & Wright, 2000, p. 57) and the “rhetorical construction of the teacher” (Nespor & Barber, 1991, p. 417) that accompanies it, needs to have some specificity and scaffolding put around it, now. The overarching issue becomes one of explaining how the policy relays work on teachers' subjectivities, and in order to do that I need to briefly summarise arguments I have rehearsed elsewhere (Smyth, 2003) in terms of three conduits, namely:

1. The corrosion of the culture and character of teaching, with the shift to individual responsibility for delivering outcomes.
2. The intensification in leadership and management away from supporting the work of teaching, to pursuing corporate visioning.
3. The dislocation of teachers' pedagogic and professional identities as educative space is eroded as teachers lead increasingly divided lives, continually moving between the corporate makeover of their work, and agonising decisions about what they regard as being the essence of good professional judgement.

The corrosion of the character of teaching

The “cluttered terrain” (Beane, 1994, p. 69) of dubious accountability requirements that have become a hallmark of contemporary teachers' work and that have pushed schools to operate more like

businesses and quasi-markets, has also brought with it a significant displacement as to what is important in teaching.

The irony is that the pre-occupation with this “tyranny of transparency” (Strathern, 2000, p. 309) that comes with the mentality of the audit culture, also has the significant downside of concealing or rendering certain things invisible, and in the case of schools, it is the leaching away of trust. This is occurring through forms of restructuring that are an assault on the social structures, cultural values and modes of organisation of schools. These perversions occur through: the re- instituting of hierarchies; the diminution of co-operation; the press to foster competitive individualism between and within schools; and the diversion of schools away from their educative agenda by requiring them to operate in more entrepreneurial ways like businesses. What gets foregrounded in this kind of climate is a reversion to forms of “traditionalism” (Halpin & Moore, 2000, p. 133) that emphasise image and impression management through an artificial focus on school uniforms, plant and equipment, discipline and homework policies, and school expulsions/exclusions/suspensions. These projects of ‘glossification’ do their work by producing a press for what amount to “defensive teaching” (McNeil, 1988, p. 112; 2000, p. 3), in a context in which schools still steadfastly struggle to define their existence as being primarily around something as intangible as changing the minds of students and the construction of relationships in a “relationally rich” (Morrill, Johnson, & Harrison, 1998, p. 640) environment.

Fine (1989) put my argument succinctly when she said that this press to re- configure schools in increasingly performative ways that focus on outcomes and achievement has the effect of “privatizing and psychologizing” a public issue (p. 165)—the idea that schools are places that should be creating the institutional framework for modelling expansive ideas of democracy and “developing the capacity for good citizenship” (Morrison, 2001, p. 197).

Intensification of leadership and management

The most significant element of this re-configuration of schools lies in the re- worked relationship between schools and the ‘centre’, by which I mean the diminished but significantly more powerful and elite educational policy making units. “Big policy” (Ball, 1998, p. 119) around the educationally most significant issues is reserved for the policy making centre, with small policy being relegated to the school level around how implementation might best occur. The much-touted notion of flexibility at the school level becomes a chimera, as decision-making about the most significant issues is already decided higher up the line.

Consultation takes the form of ‘fake’ discussions about decisions already made at a distance from classroom teaching and learning, and the focus is invariably limited to how best to translate other people’s agendas into local contexts. The re-emphasising of hierarchy within this schema reinforces a ‘them’ and ‘us’ balkanised set of relations as managers are increasingly cut free from the core work of schools and are freed up to ‘manage’. Leadership becomes polluted to mean delivering on the corporate vision for the school, where the large pieces of the template are developed considerably beyond the earshot of teachers. The immediate casualty in this is the labelling of anything at variance with this corporatist view of leadership as irrelevant, old-fashioned or simply out-dated. But by far the greatest casualty is the evacuation of meaning from relationships in schools, as the spaces for contest, debate and consultation are silenced and replaced with “compliance and retreat” (Marshall & Ball, 1999, p. 7).

Dislocation of pedagogic and professional identity

Across a number of studies in various countries it is becoming increasingly clear that teachers are not affected in the same way nor do they respond uniformly to reforms being imposed on them. For

example, Moore, Edwards, Halpin and George (2002) have identified two distinct ways in which teachers position themselves:

'principled pragmatism', through which teachers who feel generally positive towards recent reforms feel able to strengthen and affirm their pedagogic identities by drawing eclectically on a range of educational practices and traditions; and 'contingent pragmatism', adopted by teachers in oppositional orientations to reform, whereby enforced reactions to policy change take on something of the function of a survival strategy. (p. 551)

Viewed in this way, teachers become "speaking subjects" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 95). Teachers themselves are clearly capable of attaching more nuanced descriptors than either 'compliant' or 'resistant' as ways of referring to how they embrace or decline the current wave of educational reforms. As Moore et al. (2002) put it:

... very few of the teachers we spoke to openly declared themselves as either wholesale supporters or wholesale rejecters of government reforms in education, almost all of our respondents talked of the ways in which they had modified previous practice to 'bring it in line with' current policy, or had found ways of incorporating current policy into a largely unaltered continuing practice (effectively, what Pollard et al. [1994] describe as 'incorporation'). (p. 552)

Coldron and Smith (1999) draw on the category of "active location in social space" (p. 711) to explain how teachers acquire the resources with which they fashion a teaching identity. They explain that social space "is an array of possible relations that one person can have to others. Some of these relations are conferred by inherited social structures and categorisations and some are chosen or created by the individual ... " (p. 711) and how teachers' professional identities are formed depends largely on "the quality and availability of these varied factors" (p. 711). The more policy interventions are oriented towards imposing "greater degrees of uniformity and conformity" the greater the danger they will "threaten to impoverish the notion of active location" (Coldron & Smith, 1999, p. 711) because they diminish the space for choice and voice in the resources teachers can call upon in constructing professional repertoires. Interventions that are particularly at risk of domesticating teaching because of the stipulative frameworks that accompany them are ones like competencies, skills, standards, benchmarks, quality and other variants of world's best practice.

Education policy that reconstrues schools and teaching around notions of 'marketability', 'efficiency', 'performativity', 'management systems' and 'audit accountability' is severely corroding trust and respect, as Woods and Jeffrey (2002) note: "Control of teachers has become 'tighter, largely through the codification and monitoring of processes and practices previously left to teachers' professional judgement ... " (p. 94). Where once trust within teaching, "was localised and focussed through personal ties", the audit accountability mentality places "less emphasis on the local factors through personal ties" (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002, p. 95) and more on universal strategies and practices, codified in written, standardised procedures. As one teacher in Woods and Jeffrey's (2002) study put it:

There seems to be a whole ethos of telling you rather than interacting with you and supporting you. It's 'how we view it from up here' rather than, 'how about looking at what we might be doing with this?' There's no real discussions about what are you doing here, why are you doing that, where you're going to, or what problems you're having. He's here just to look through the paperwork. (Colin) (p. 95)

According to Woods and Jeffrey (2002), the changed relationship is embedded in the new "technologies of regulation" (du Gay, 1997, p. 295) that are coming to increasingly govern the act of teaching self. Trust that is so crucial to the conduct of everyday life is now becoming depersonalised and "invested in processes and abstract systems" (p. 90). This "diminution of trust" (Woods & Jeffrey, 2002, p. 89) in teaching that accompanies more instrumental approaches, is having the effect of

requiring teachers to relate to “two or more competing discourses” (p. 89). What is being confronted, Woods and Jeffrey (2002) found, was the notion of “a unified self-identity [that] had been unchallenged for many years” and in its place much “heart searching” as teachers were forced “to reconsider and reconstruct” who they were in ways that “forced [them] to become more strategic and political in defending their self-identities” (p. 104).

In these circumstances, teachers are seen as having “substantial” or more enduring identities, as well as “situational” or more “transient” identities that are “given meaning by their contextual location” (Woods & Jeffrey, 1999, p. 90). The message being conveyed to teachers is one of lack of trust that, in the words of one their teacher informants, brings with it “the assumption ... that teachers are inadequate” and, as one put it, “it stinks!” The whole approach “thrives on inadequacy” (Woods & Jeffrey, 1999, p. 95).

For many of the teachers in Woods and Jeffrey’s (2002) study, “mutual respect” (p. 92) lay at the centre of their teaching. In these circumstances, “children will feel they can take risks, and not be rejected as people” (p. 92) and this was crucial to the relations between teachers and the way they are treated:

... you have respect for other people’s professionalism. And you know if you need something, you know who to go to and you know you will get the kind of response you need to have, and you know the other person will give the time to help you. I think it’s mutual trust and respect. (Grace) (p. 92)

Teachers’ doing identity work, in Woods and Jeffrey’s (2002) research, meant meeting the challenges in ways that amounted to “positioning” (p. 99) yourself in relation to the changes. For example: (a) embracing it and “going with the flow” (p. 98) while protecting the self by “talking it up”(p. 98); (b) refusal or outright “rejection of the new assigned identity” (p. 99); (c) self-assertion, or taking a position so as to draw the line around what was considered tolerable (p. 100); (d) self-displacement that minimised the worst excesses and harmful effects (p. 101); (e) game playing, or going through the motions so as to defend the real teaching self (p. 102); and (f) re-alignment (p. 103) in the form of ‘strategic compliance’ (Lacey, 1977) that involved recognising the tensions and accepting them with private reservations, and then getting on with life without tearing yourself apart (p. 104).

Meaning and relevance for the New Zealand context

The relevance of this line of argument for New Zealand is an interesting, intriguing and controversial one, that goes considerably beyond the scope of this paper, but some comment is warranted.

One of the most insightful and compelling commentaries and analyses is provided by Thrupp (1998). At the level of the broad policy context, Thrupp makes it clear that New Zealand has been far from hermetically sealed from these reforms, and in many respects New Zealand has led the way—a claim empirically documented by well-regarded international commentators (see: Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Ladd & Fiske, 2001). According to Thrupp (1998), in comparative terms, “educational reform in New Zealand and England over the last decade has been remarkably similar. Despite some important historical differences ... both countries have gone further and faster than most to introduce neoliberal approaches to the marketisation of education” (p. 195).

The parallels are particularly striking in terms of the ideologies and practices around school inspection—the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England and the Educational Review Office (ERO) in New Zealand: “... both share overwhelmingly technicist approaches to assessing schools [and] while there are some differences in their methods, these are more matters of detail than substance and are in any case gradually disappearing” (Thrupp, 1998, p. 195). Thrupp (1998) identifies the similarities as lying in “their ideological role of ‘turning up the heat’ of neoliberal school reform ... with populist ‘tough on schools’ discourses ... [and] pursuing ‘failing’ schools and

'incompetent' teachers with uncommon vigor" (p. 196). Where the 'policy hatred' (Hattam, 2001) becomes most apparent is at the level of what I have labelled the 'politics of blame' (Smyth, 1993), and which Thrupp (1998) amplifies in terms of the "attempt to construct school failure as the clear responsibility of schools themselves" (p. 196).

While it is certainly not the case that all schools in New Zealand have experienced the range of reforms similarly or uniformly, and some have indeed been adept and creative in finding spaces within which they can exploit them to their advantage, there is considerable evidence pointing to the negative effects on teachers. This is most evident, for example, in the intensification of teachers' work as a consequence of the emphasis on paperwork forms of accountability and the requirement on schools to promote image and obtain market share. In a stock take 10 years after New Zealand had introduced the reform of the self-managing school, Wylie (1998) pursued this issue through the lens that "the aim of self-managing schools is not simply to become self-managed but to make a positive difference to learning" (p. 1). Wylie's conclusion was that the cumulative effect of the self-managing reforms, while they may have had some merits, had certainly brought with them "high and intensive workloads for principals and teachers" (p. 11) and a significant weakening of co-operative networks between teachers and schools that are so crucial for the creation of supportive learning conditions, especially in the most disadvantaged schools. In other words, the free market principles of competition produced a rendering of the social fabric that lies at the heart of good teaching. Added to this is what Thrupp and Willmott (2003) refer to as the "opportunity cost" of the "expense, time and energy which could be used on instructional and equity concerns" (p. 45). The result, at best, is that teaching is being converted into "the exhausting profession" (Beckett, 2003, p. 1) and, at worst, "the heart of the educational project is gouged out and left empty" (Ball, 1999, p. 22).

It is at the level of the reforms that impact most closely on New Zealand teachers in classrooms that some of the most interesting revelations have occurred. For example, Locke's (2001) study of 900 secondary English teachers in New Zealand provides evidence of how curriculum and assessment reforms have "eroded the ground" (p. 5) of teachers' professional judgement. Indicative of the responses of teachers is the following comment by a teacher in Locke's (2003) study:

[Managerial professionalism] undermines my morale as a teacher by dictating—telling me how to do my job. I feel I am playing someone else's silly game in following the detail of the English Curriculum in this way. It doesn't allow me to use my own experience and judgement in the way I'd like to ... It undermines and frustrates me. If you are permitted to think for yourself you put more into the job because you take responsibility for what you do and work out of a sense of conviction or rightness. If you are not allowed to use your own judgement you might as well be a computer. If I'm reduced to a cog in a machine, I don't feel like a human being who is growing, responding, serving needs as I see them ... It takes away your soul. (p. 231)

But, as Locke (2001) notes, when teachers make comments like this then what they are effectively doing is constructing a "platform for mounting a critique of what they feel is happening to them" (p. 17). They are developing "a weapon in resisting discursive colonisation" (Locke, 2003, p. 231) or more broadly "establishing a counter-hegemonic bridgehead" (Locke, 2003, p. 227). Locke describes the English Study Design as such an opportunity—for teachers "to participate in professional development that was teacher-initiated as distinct from the Government's reform agenda" and, to that extent, "necessarily critically reflective" rather than "a knee-jerk reaction to curriculum and assessment reforms" (2003, p. 238).

Returning to my earlier caveat about the complexity of how reforms are received and experienced by teachers. Reflecting on the results of his New Zealand study Locke (2001) put it that:

... the view that ... teachers can be easily compartmentalized is difficult to sustain ...
If anything, this study reveals a profession characterised by a range of positions, at

times compliant, sometimes resistant, often unheard and invariably eloquent when given half a chance of having their voices listened to. (p. 21)

He concludes that: “On balance ... these teachers taken as a whole can be seen as manifesting an intellectual resistance to major aspects of the curriculum and assessment reforms that have taken place in New Zealand since the early 1990s ... “ (p. 21). Thrupp (1999) deserves the concluding word on this, when he argues that what is being enacted here is the need to “reject the politics of polarization and blame ... [and instead build] co-operative rather than competitive relationships” (p. 194). He says that teachers need to “retain a balance between accepting powerful limitations on change and doing the best possible job” (p. 194). This might mean taking a courageous stand:

They should not be afraid at times to make good use of the gulf between official policy and classroom practice in the service of their students. For instance, when schools are often being asked to impose inappropriate or damaging curriculum or assessment innovations, paying only lip service to what is required may be entirely justified. (Thrupp, 1999, p. 194)

Teaching and research as improvisational workⁱⁱ

The starting point in any retrieval of the situation described above involves confronting what Goffman (1963) called a “spoiled identity” or what Potter and Wetherell (1987) referred to as the “noxious identity” (p. 77) being constructed for teachers. Goodson (2000) has described what I am alluding to in the following terms: “Teachers are less and less planners of their own destiny and more and more delivers of the prescriptions written by others” (p. 14). Several of my PhD students have put their own particular spin on this. Munt (2002) argues that what it means to be a teacher “is currently being undermined by powerful discourses at work in our society” (p. 6) as schools as moral and ethical spaces come more and more under siege. Naidu (2003) shows how performance management of teachers produces a ‘bastardisation’ of teaching; he says: “bastardisation, derived from the word ‘bastard’—something irregular, inferior, ‘spurious’ or ‘unusual’ (Macquarie Dictionary, 1999, p. 175)—aptly describes the nature of teachers’ work in a climate of educational change” (p. 13).

The language of school performance, according to Fielding (2001), is a classic case of linguistic robbery and a kind of stolen language in which an “industrial model of quality assurance” (Fish, 1991, p. 22) is used to construct teaching around a “deficit narrative” (Giles, 2002, p. 130). As put by Fielding (2000):

We are facing a multiple crisis ... a crisis of intellectual and imaginative nerve that currently afflicts policy makers, teachers in schools and the research community alike. We remain prisoners of an outmoded intellectual framework and a properly zealous political will.... (p. 397)

To borrow a phrase from Theodore Adorno (1994), the German critical theorist, philosopher and key figure from the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, reforms like those around ‘performance’, are “uncouth interloper[s] ... arrogant, alien and improper” (p. 23).

The effect on teachers can best be described as a kind of “benumbment” (Giles, 2001, p. 132), a kind of estrangement in which people appear to be incapable of listening or responding to their inner voice and instead become the victim of some external imposed state of affairs. The antidote to benumbment, Giles (2001) argues, is a process of “radical listening” (p. 132), creating “viable free spaces” (Giles, 2002, p. 154) in which people are able to reveal narratives of who they are. In the case of teachers, this means providing the conditions within the work of teaching, in which teachers’ professional identities and their capacity to make pedagogical judgements are affirmed. Teachers are able to understand the

ⁱⁱ I wish to acknowledge the debt of gratitude to Rob Hattam who, through many discussions, helped to inform my thinking on the notion of teaching as improvisation.

conditions of their professional existence as teachers, where achievements and successes are confirmed, and where resistance is possible. Giles (2001) calls this "making the social script [of teaching] visible" (p. 135).

In my recent book, *Teachers' Work in a Globalising Economy* (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000), my co-authors and I tackled the issues raised so far by arguing for a constellation of elements that constitute a kind of "organisational economy" (Wexler, 1992, p. 8) in which schools mediate the flow of social and cultural resources teachers and students use to create an identity for themselves. What we were arguing for was a reinvigorated or revitalised critical theory of teachers' work capable of connecting changes embodied in an expansive political-economic, socio-cultural and technological interpretation of globalisation, to what is happening in classrooms.

It is worth rehearsing here, in cameo form, the essence of our argument because of the impetus it gives to framing and "theoris[ing] the social processes involved in the construction of subjectivity" (Ezzy, 1997, p. 428) and the subsequent space to account for the ways in which teachers "relate to and manoeuvre" (p. 431) around whose discourses authorise 'good practices' and who controls teaching. The juxtaposition of elements comprise the following propositions:

1. Schooling is still a significant site of social and cultural transformation.
2. Schools can make a significant contribution to an egalitarian society.
3. Teachers are the most important actors in the technology called schools.
4. Teachers' own identities have to contend with the power relations that operate in schools and educational systems.
5. Teachers as workers sell their labour power in a 'globalising' labour market.
6. The curriculum/pedagogy is the main specification of the labour process of teaching.
7. Control of teachers' work takes structural, ideological and disciplinary modes.
8. Control, as a result of globalisation, has a detrimental and material effect on teachers' work. (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 149)

Cascading across these elements, it is possible to encapsulate their essence something like this. The increasingly incursive effects of media and popular culture into young lives in the form of "mediascapes" and "hyperrealities" (Luke, 1991, p. 1) mean that schools can appear as increasingly irrelevant institutions. However, when publicly provided, neighbourhood schools, even though contestable entities in many respects, are still worth fighting for, for several reasons.

As social institutions, schools are significantly engaged in contributing to the identity formation of young people (i.e., they are involved in helping to shape young peoples' lives). Schools also act as gatekeepers that (re)produce economic inequality; they credential the already wealthy while concealing the way in which the scam (Fitzgerald, 1976) works so that schools produce economic futures for some and not for others. This takes the form of some who get access to meaningful and well-paid jobs, and many who drift from one menial poorly paid part-time job to another. Putting a more positive construal on it, under the right set of conditions schools provide the representational resources by which the population makes sense of their lives—in other words, schools produce cultures (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 151). Schools can also be places that are "attuned to the ways in which media culture is impacting on the identity formation of young people" (p. 153) and, therefore, places that permit young people to interrogate their place in transnational capitalism.

Historically speaking, schools in the 3–4 decades after World War II, had a commitment to advancing a broadly egalitarian view of the role of schooling, while also contributing to a more egalitarian society. Pedagogically this manifested itself as an 'ethic of care'—the notion that "[C]aring is about doing something more, about putting yourself out, in an attempt to do the best by your students and it

may involve large sacrifices in time and energy” (Smyth et al., p. 122). In Australia, for example, this was sometimes summarised as *Schooling for a Fair Go* (Smyth, Hattam & Lawson, 1998).

In the technology called schooling, teachers are being called upon to handle increasing complexity: around young lives; the escalating gradient of poverty; the collapse of the youth labour market; the fracturing, fragmentation and suffering of rural communities; the immanent possibility of resort to violent wars as the way of resolving difference with supposedly rogue states; and young people who are demanding more as they struggle with identities increasingly constructed for them by media culture.

In and around all of this complexity, young lives are constantly being negotiated by teachers daily as they try to make the most appropriate decisions, while constantly shuttling back and forth between an “educator’s sensibility” developed through experience and an imposed neo-liberal ideology of marketisation that celebrates and “privileges individualism over community, instrumentalism over ethics, and private ownership over common wealth” (Smyth et al., p. 156)—all of this in a context of an infatuation with digital electronics that fantasises about schooling without teachers.

If we put aside for a moment the largely vocational role of schooling, it is possible to portray schools as places that are engaged in doing ‘identity work’ (Snow & Anderson, 1987) for teachers and students in the important project of ‘becoming somebody’ (Wexler, 1992). Control lies at the centre of teachers’ work and identities and what it means to be a competent teacher: “teachers seem to be caught between their own ‘internally persuasive’ views of teaching and learning—an educators’ sensibility—and the ‘authoritative discourses’ of contemporary school reform—the neo-liberal way” (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 158). There is a marked and quite profound consequence, as my own research has found:

Our ethnographic work indicates that this context produces negative feelings of self for many teachers that are generated from a failure to maintain previous levels of quality in classroom teaching. Doing more with less usually means doing it less well, especially when the job is already intense and complex. (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 158)

While there is much more that could be said about how teachers live this contradiction, suffice to say that teachers are continually involved in manoeuvring around managerialist, patriarchal, upward driven accountability processes in contexts of schooling that demand “an increased need for interpersonal competencies, at a time in which it is increasingly difficult to maintain quality relationships with students and colleagues” (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 159). Blackmore (1996) refers to the kind of identity work teachers do in these circumstances as ‘emotional labour’—the “repressing of negative emotions, of dealing with embarrassment, shame or guilt, while also being committed to a view of profession that values an ethic of care” (Smyth et al., 2000, p. 159).

Taking qualitative research into schools

Qualitative research of a particular kind has a capacity to tackle the issues raised above in several ways by

- positioning the ‘problem’ as involving the reclamation of teaching;
- providing legitimation for teachers’ forms of knowledge;
- articulating a more respectful and trustworthy view of teachers’ work;
- providing ways of unravelling the complexity of teachers’ lives and work
- providing teachers with a way of appropriating policy; and
- regarding teachers as cultural constructors of their work, rather than other people’s technicians

A way of describing what I am referring to here is what educational anthropologists like Foley, Levinson and Hurtig (2000-2001) label the “new educational ethnography” (p. 37). They are broadly representative of a “new generation of socially critical researchers” who see their role primarily in terms of contributing knowledge for the benefit of students and teachers, and they pursue this through “insider studies” or “insider ethnographies” (Foley et al., 2000-2001, p. 37). The impetus for these insider ethnographies derives from the “border crossing” work of “halfie anthropologists”—ethnic researchers “with strong ties to—and a propensity to study ethnographically—their national cultures of origin” (Foley et al., 2000-2001, p. 83). The defining feature of such studies lies in the way “they construct insider ethnographic knowledge using conceptual tools from the academy, and they present this knowledge in a way that renders their subjects’ actions and beliefs comprehensible and sympathetic to outsiders and insiders alike” (Foley et al., 2000-2001, p. 37). The crucial importance of these studies lies in their agenda of regarding insider contributions as “bring[ing] ... to light the dynamics of culture that may lead to the design of more democratic educational arrangements and hence the attainment of greater educational opportunity and achievement” (Foley et al., 2000-2001, p. 37), in other words, “enriching our understanding of educational processes and enhancing our ability to make progressive changes in educational practice” (Foley et al., 2000–2001, p. 38).

At the centre of this new insider ethnography lies “a respectful emphasis on the meanings that insiders attribute to their own behaviour ...” and, even when done by people who are technically outsiders, the overwhelming intent is “to sensitively and sympathetically portray insider knowledge” (Foley et al., 2000–2001, p. 40). Pollard and Filer (1999) describe this appropriately as “appreciative ethnography” (p. 154) because of the way this approach both ‘hears’ and empathises with the perspective of actors and takes them seriously in the analysis of evidence.

Some of the broader guiding principles that emerge from research of this kind, as it relates to teachers, go as follows:

- Because the issues, problems, categories and forms of knowledge are ones decided upon and that emerge out of teachers’ experiences, aspirations and understandings of the meanings of the pedagogical world of teaching, then there is high levels of ownership and commitment from teachers.
- It follows that when research is less concerned with imposing theoretical closure, then teachers’ own indigenous theories are given more space to “breathe” (Marcus, 1998, p. 18).
- The narrative and storied forms of representation of qualitative and critical research are much more consistent with the ways teachers convey information to one another in conversational and dialogical ways.
- Storied and portraiture accounts by teachers are much more emotionally open and honest than so-called ‘scientific’ studies that “repress such emotion through distancing methodologies, theoretical discourses, and posturing as the invulnerable objective decoder of reality” (Foley, 2002, p. 145). To make his point Foley (2002) invokes and builds upon the title of Behar’s (1996) book in saying that “anthropology that does not break your heart is not worth doing”: In other words, observations in qualitative / critical research are “filtered through her sorrow, shame, fear, loathing, guilt, vanity, and self-deception” (p. 145).
- These kinds of research accounts are infused with “strong notions of agency (praxis) and structure (history)” as they “focus on how people negotiate, assimilate, and transform their lived reality” (Foley, 2002, p. 147).
- Qualitative critical research in and around teaching is primarily concerned with mapping and understanding the cultural spaces and practices around teachers and students, and less concerned with “assuredly ... discovering reality” (Foley, 2002, p. 149). There is a tentativeness, provisionality and impressionistic nature to it that renders it always subject to revision in the light of more informed experience.

In parallel to the re-working currently underway in a post-colonial view of research into people of colour, we need a similar post-colonial set of views informing the extrication of schools from the dominating, suffocating, domesticating colonisation and educational policy bog produced by resort to the inappropriate and often hostile discourses, policy trajectories and practices of the corporate sector. Teachers and socially committed scholars working with teachers need to heed the advice of Māori scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and “stop collaborating with outside ... researchers [and agencies] unless they demonstrate a real respect for [teachers’] indigenous ways and coproduce findings that are actually useful to [teachers]” (Foley, 2001, p. 48).

In other words, there needs to be much greater epistemological respect shown towards teachers’ and students’ repositories of knowledge, which “must be central to any inquiry process” (Foley, 2001, p. 48). In part, this means, “outside researchers must report back to them [teachers], debate and distribute research tasks [i.e., genuinely involve them in the formulation of the research problem], and give voice to different community sectors [e.g., parents]” (p. 48). This will also of necessity mean respecting the largely oral culture of teachers’ work and generally being more sympathetic to the values that underlie the relational work of teachers and the lives of students.

What we need are more genuinely indigenous teacherly epistemologies that produce oppositional knowledge to the prevailing policy paradigms, and that explicate and celebrate the distinctive ways in which teachers and students know teaching, learning and pedagogy. This means crafting a policy agenda, and its accompanying research regime, that is less distrustful in the way it is embedded in a deficit view of teachers, schools and students (compared with accountability, audit, appraisal, performance and testing regimes) and that is less ‘subtractive’ (Valenzuela, 1999) of the culture of schools and the lives of students and teachers.

Over the past decade, along with colleagues, I have been involved in a wide-ranging project of exploring with teachers in quite intensive ways how they live with, inhabit and reconfigure education policy as it has been visited upon them. What was not entirely clear to me at the time was the most appropriate way to describe what I was doing. I have variously labelled it case study, voiced narratives and, on occasions, partial or compressed ethnographies. With the benefit of hindsight, it has become clearer to me that what I was really up to is what Dorothy Smith (1999) refers to as “institutional ethnography” (p. 228).

What I was doing was not ethnography simply because of the methodological procedures of observation, interviewing, description and analysis being used but, rather, because they were studies of teachers’ everyday lives and the social relations within which they were embedded. Smith (1988) captures it in this way:

The notion of ethnography ... commit[s] us to an exploration, description, and analysis of ... a complex of relations, not conceived in the abstract but from the entry point of some particular person or persons whose everyday world of work is organized thereby. (p. 160)

Like Smith (1988), what I was doing emerged out of a commitment “to an investigation and explication of how ‘it’ actually is, of how ‘it’ actually works, or actual practices and relations” (p. 160). Teachers are intimately woven into an intricate set of socio-political relationships because the work has so much to do with either advancing or stifling the life chances of young people, depending upon how teachers conceive of the work.

The sense in which such ethnography is ‘institutional’ lies in the way it identifies “a complex of relations forming part of the ruling apparatus, organized around a distinctive function” (Smith, 1988, p. 160), in this case schooling.

When we adopt a pre-disposition to exploring how things got to be the way they are, to invoke the title of another of Smith’s (1990) works, then we invariably become involved with the ‘conceptual practices of power’ and adopt an avowedly political position. Research of this kind is not only

describing and analysing what exists but it is concerned with explaining how activities are organized and the larger social, economic and political spheres of which they are a part. Because the way this kind of research foregrounds and makes paramount the prominence of an 'ethical sensibility', to coin a phrase, then what we have occurring is what Fine (1994) refers to as 'working the hyphen'—in Foley 's (2002) words, a "thorough interrogation of one's ethnographic practice: Ethics; theoretical and interpretive constructs; narrative and representational choices; political commitments" (p. 150). In other words, a continual asking of the question, research for whom?

To round out this paper, and by way of a conclusion having travelled through the policy damage being done to teachers' work, this paper has opened up some possibilities whereby research can become part of the restoration. Because teaching is political work many of us involved in interrogating the work of teaching are inevitably drawn into this in partisan ways because, as Levinson and Sutton (2001) indicate, teaching is always work that involves the "ongoing dynamic between policy formation and appropriation" (p. 12) in the 'cultural production of the educated person' (Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996).

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