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1. NEBULOUS GOBBLEDEGOOK

*The Politics of Influence on How and What to Teach in Australian Schools*

It’s not gobbledegook to everyone but it is gobbledegook to the teachers, it’s gobbledegook to the students and it’s gobbledegook to the parents. These three groups are the only ones that matter. (Greg Williams, co-founder of People Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes (PLATO); Lewis & Salusinszky, 2006, p. 1).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an analysis of policy and policy making about schooling and teachers’ professional learning in Australia. Unlike most policy analyses, it is not focused on a specific policy document – the official “medium for carrying and transmitting a policy message” (Ozga, 2000, p. 33) – but on the “context of influence” (Bowe, Ball & Gold, 1992) that largely produces this message, particularly the “mediation” (Thomson, 2002) attempted from within the pages of Australia’s three major daily newspapers (*The Australian*, *The Age*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald*) during the first decade (1996-2006) of the Howard Federal Government. Approximately 100 newspaper articles were identified and analysed, most appearing in *The Australian* (a neo-liberal/neo-conservative national broadsheet) and dominated by three principal writers: Kevin Donnelly (author of *Why Our Schools are Failing* and former chief of staff for Howard Government minister, Kevin Andrews), Luke Slattery (co-author of *Why Our Universities are Failing*, former education editor of *The Age* and former higher education editor of *The Australian*), and Samantha Maiden (a journalist at *The Australian*).

While many see the media as having a vital role in democracies in reporting on and illuminating the political process, the argument here is that increasingly the media (and particular journalists) are significant players in that process, specifically within contexts of influence that produce education policy and, in this case, in relation to the learning required to know how and what to teach in Australian schools. Fairclough (2003, p. 3) is often cited in similar endeavours for his analysis of the “mediatization” of politics and government, referring to the ways in which the media now affects policy processes and texts, particularly how it has become part of the policy production process in the manufacture of consent;

*A. Berry, A. Clemans and A. Kostogriz (Eds.), Dimensions of Professional Learning: Professionalism, Practice and Identity, 5–21. © 2007 Sense Publishers. All rights reserved.*
well illustrated in the activities of the Blair Labour Government in the UK (Fairclough 2000; Franklin 2004). For example, Chistopherson (2002, in Franklin 2004, p. 256) has characterised the Blair Government’s communication strategy in terms of three ‘Rs’²: rhetoric, repetition and rebuttal.

What is intended in this chapter though is more in keeping with Bourdieu’s (1998) view that the media has become important in constructing policy agendas and is not simply utilised in the service of an existing agenda. Lingard and Rawolle (2004) have theorised the influence of the media on policy production in terms of “cross-field effects”, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of field and his text, *On Television and Journalism* (Bourdieu, 1998). In their work, Lingard and Rawolle conceive of a range of cross-field effects: structural, event, systemic, temporal, hierarchical and vertical; categories not intended as entirely discrete or as comprehensive of all effects. In these terms, the hierarchical and vertical effects of the media on education (i.e., the asymmetrical structural links between these fields) provide the chapter’s warrant. We share with others the view that the media as a field is increasingly influential or seeking to influence what and how teachers should teach and that this influence warrants analysis as part of the policy making process. This is particularly important given proposed changes to Australian media ownership laws that would see a concentration of such ownership and of its potential influence on policy.

As noted, our analysis differs in that our attention is less focused on the direct effects of the media on the production of policy texts (although we are concerned with its potential effects), given that this is yet to be fully realised in relation to policy in this field (although we recognise its effects on the Inquiry into Teacher Education recently conducted by the Australian Federal House of Representatives) and, in particular, such influence is not yet evident in relevant policy texts on teacher professional learning. Rather, we are concerned with analysing the messages for policy, as a kind of analysis of policy, to rework Gordon, Lewis and Young’s (1977) distinction between the two (Gale, 2006a). Alternative views on teaching and teacher education are often evident in commissioned government research providing analysis for policy (e.g., the recent Australian federal government report on *Teaching Reading*; Rowe, 2005), constituting one form of influence on the messages for policy. In this chapter we focus on messages for policy emanating from the media, in particular the print media.

The extent of this influence is necessarily mediated by the particular political and historical context of Australian teacher education. Briefly, formal education (including schooling and higher education) is a residual responsibility of the states retained at the time of Australian federation at the beginning of the twentieth century (in 1901). In the mid 1970s and under agreements reached by the Whitlam Federal Government with the states, financial and administrative (but not legislative) responsibility for universities was transferred to the Commonwealth. Under their respective Acts of State Parliament, universities retained authority to determine their own curricula and award their own degrees. However, the history of teacher education, now located within universities, is somewhat different. In Australia, learning to be a teacher was once done ‘on the job’ in the context of
idiosyncratic master-apprentice relationships and specific employer (usually state department) requirements. As a field – if at that time it could be regarded as having its own distinctive features (Bourdieu, 1993) – teacher education was necessarily and strongly influenced by and located within teaching practice, which itself was informed by broader educational policy. Later, when the initial lessons of learning to be a teacher were removed from the school classroom, through their transfer to state-controlled teachers colleges and colleges of advanced education (creating pre-service education), teacher education was inevitably afforded greater autonomy, albeit still under the authority of government departments of education and, increasingly, in tandem with departmental professional development (‘PD’ or in-service education) of teachers and sometimes for them (Gale, 2006b).

We could attribute these changes to systemic effects – “broad changes [over time] in the values underpinning social fields” (Lingard & Rawolle, 2004, p. 369) – but this would be to miss more significant structural changes that distinguished teacher (pre- and in-service) education as a field, albeit related and with similar origins. As Australian teacher education developed its own “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 1990) – more recently reflecting the academic freedoms of the Unified National System (UNS) of Australian universities into which it was incorporated in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the Dawkins reforms – much education policy and practice became far less influential in determining the education that teachers receive in universities, so much so that it is now mundane to note the seemingly endless reviews of teacher education that failed to have impact. For example, Gregor Ramsey noted in the most recent New South Wales government review of teacher education that:

Unless new approaches are developed in a number of important areas, my belief is that like the twenty previous reviews of teacher education of national significance over the same number of years, little will happen as a result of this Report. (Ramsey, 2000, p. 3)

Despite its apparent ability to ward off outside challenges in the past, the current teacher education settlement is under siege. While others attempt its renegotiation, teacher educators’ “strategic orientation toward the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99) has tended to delay or to stall the renegotiation of interests (Gale, 2003). Ignoring or “standing tough” against “outsiders” as a form of crisis management (Offe, 1984) may have worked up until now but it is a strategy fast outliving its usefulness. In short, crisis management in schooling and in teacher education is in crisis. Those who seek change and who increasingly dominate contexts of influence in education policy making (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992) are out manoeuvring or circumventing (Gale, 2003) the interests of teachers and teacher education, taking their concerns to forums (such as the media) with potential influence in reconfiguring teacher education policy and practice. For these reasons, this chapter takes seriously (without being convinced by) recent media reports that champion new ways of being a teacher in Australian schools and, by implication, what teachers now need to learn in order to take up their new identities. The analysis is concerned with naming the messages for schooling and
teacher education and the assumptions that inform them.

The chapter is organised into two main sections. The first reports on the apparent “crisis” in school curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, as identified within our collection of newspaper articles. Bernstein (1971) refers to these domains as three message systems of education, with pedagogy centrally located in a complex three-way relationship (Lingard et al., 2001). Lingard (2006) suggests that “historically, educational policy has had more to say to and about curriculum and assessment than to pedagogies” (p. 3), although inevitably policy of this kind still speaks to pedagogy given its intimate connections with the other two. For example, Lingard (2006) points to the production of “defensive pedagogies” developed in response to standardised testing policy in US schools (McNeil, 2000). Ball (2006), drawing on Lyotard’s (1984) notion of performativity, has also argued that pedagogy is increasingly the explicit interest of education policy. In our analysis of the context of influence producing school policy, we note in the data a strong focus on curriculum and assessment (and their implications for pedagogy) whereas discussions of pedagogy tend to dissolve into attacks on teacher educators rather than consider how teachers teach. Each of these message systems is addressed in turn.

The chapter’s second and shorter section distils the assumptions and implications embedded in the data about teachers, teaching and teacher education. In Lingard and Rawolle’s (2004) terms, we see structural effects between schooling and teacher education, specifically the effects of schooling and its logic of practice on teacher education, as this is imagined by the media reports under examination. The assumptions and implications are primarily about where the problems with schooling lie, what teaching should entail and what these say about the nature of education. Our intention is to raise these issues to the surface rather than to engage with them at great length, given our primary interest in their politics.

We conclude with a brief discussion which argues that rather than an evidence-based engagement with the problems of schooling and therefore with teacher education, the ‘problems’ raised in the Australian media over the last decade have tended to have more to do with politics than with education. However, we caution teachers and teacher educators against dismissing these accounts out of hand. Influence in policy making is not confined to substantive evidence and rational argument. Instead, teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to take the debates seriously and learn how to engage effectively with these in media forums.

MEDIA MESSAGES FOR SCHOOLING AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Claus Offe (1984) has noted that the way in which crisis is named by opponents of current political, economic and social arrangements generally indicates its potential resolution. In similar fashion, media reports of crises in education rarely stop at reporting the ‘facts’. This is evident in the analysis below of articles in Australian newspapers over the last decade, which provide a coherent, consistent, and sustained ‘attack’ on teaching and teacher education as well as ‘messages’ about
how things should be. We have organised these messages into three categories –
curriculum, assessment and pedagogy (Bernstein, 1971) – as a way of analysing
the claims that are being made in relation to teaching, teachers and their education.
It is important to note that these claims are often made without evidence, the use of
research is selective, and claims in one article often counter claims made in another
(sometimes by the same author), although through our analysis we have aimed
where possible to bring coherence to such accounts. Indicative of the imagined
sense of crisis, emotive language abounds and often substitutes for the lack of
evidence and reasoned argument.

This framing and naming of values – not simply what is legitimated by research
and practice – is what constitutes policy making in contexts of influence (Gale,
2006a). Couldry (2000) has written similarly about the media’s production of
legitimate and naturalised accounts:

He suggests that media power is exercised through processes of framing,
ordering in terms of hierarchical implications of framing; naming in the sense
of the media as the principal authority as the principal source of ‘facts’;
spacing, in the sense that media is distanced from most people’s lives; and
imagining, in terms of the “imaginative and emotional investments in the
symbolic hierarchy of the media frame” and how it taps into our sense of
identity. (Blackmore & Thomson, 2004, pp. 313-314, emphasis original)

Each of these strategies – framing, ordering, naming, spacing and imagining – are
evident in the attempted influence on teaching in Australia through the newspaper
extracts examined below.

Curriculum: Back to Basics

The principal criticism in the media levelled against the current school curriculum
is that it is crowded with ‘non-essentials’ and ideologically loaded material.
Donnelly, for example, describes it as “broad” and “nebulous” with the goal of
indoctrinating young, impressionable students into a questionable “left-wing”
world-view fed by “wacky” and “new-age” values (2005d, p. 14; 2005f, p. 8). The
solution, in his view, lies with a return to “the basics” (p. 14), especially the ability
to read and write. Debates over the status accorded to literacy in the curriculum
appear to be something of a perennial issue for Australian education, with one of
the earliest in our survey of newspaper articles on teaching and teacher education
inciting a “war” on the “serious literacy problem in Australia” (Moore, 1997, p.
13):

Can our children read or not? Worrying illiteracy levels have governments,
educationalists and parents up in arms. Here, experts argue it is time to
deploy resources and funding in a more strategic plan of attack, and that
parents are the front-line troops.

Debates around the nature of this ‘literacy crisis’ suggest that the issue is less to do
with a ‘lack’ of literacy skills being taught in schools and more with defining what
exactly we mean when we speak of ‘being literate’. And the recent attack on English curricular from several Australian states implies that the main point of contention lies with the critical literacy movement. Denigrated as a “virus” (Norrie, 2005, p. 10), critical approaches to literacy and its postmodern proponents have been slated for “‘mumbo jumbo’ teaching” and the spread of “cryptic jargon”, “outdated literary theories”, and “cappuccino courses” (Norrie, 2005; Slattery, 2005a, 2005b). McIlroy’s (2005) disquiet with English as it is currently taught in schools is that it has been corrupted by “the ideology of the Left, represented by social-critical literacy, feminist and gender theory, and deconstruction[ism]” (p. 11). The former Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, has similarly described the “infiltration” (Slattery, 2005b, p. 5) of critical approaches in education as an ideological menace. As it has been reported elsewhere in the national press:

The promulgation of a bastardised version of postmodern literary theory in schools – just when its fashion is on the wane in universities – is one more example of the insidious politicisation of our educational institutions by the cultural Left ... Before students embark on any kind of interpretation, deconstructive or otherwise, they need the basic tools of comprehension and written expression. Thanks to the dumbed-down curricula in our schools, they are missing out on these skills. More disturbing, however, is the way the ‘critical literacy’ establishment inculcates the view that the values embedded in Western literature, from the children’s classics up, necessarily exist to justify unequal power relationships based on gender, class and race. (Schools Should Foster the Love of Reading, 2005, p. 6)

In reaction to the critical literacy “establishment”, Donnelly (2005a, 2005b, 2005e, 2005g, 2005h) and others have called for literacy to be stripped of its post-modern “mumbo jumbo” and for schools to “go back to basics” (Milburn, 2004, p. 6). Portraying critical literacy’s position as one in which “reading is subjective [and] there can be as many interpretations of a text as there are readers” (McIlroy, 2005, p. 11), opponents claim that critical approaches deny students the basics since it “[ignores] the reality that there is a right and a wrong way to teach children how to read and ... no amount of edu-babble can disguise the fact that reading is highly unnatural and totally unlike learning how to speak” (Donnelly, 2005e, p. 26).

Instead, those who oppose critical approaches to literacy argue for a phonics based approach that they claim as being “the most scientific way” (Maiden, 2005d, p. 4) to teach reading and writing. Taking her lead from US initiatives that only fund literacy programs that have been “scientifically proven”, Buckingham (2004) contends that:

... researchers and educators want to see research-based methods adopted in teaching ... Teaching has been described as an art and a science. Yet some believe there is too much art and not enough science, especially in reading instruction. (p. 14)

Similarly, Macquarie University Professor Max Coltheart dismisses a recent
critique of the phonics approach by children’s author Mem Fox on grounds that she “doesn’t know anything about reading at all”, because “she’s not a scientist” (Maiden, 2005d, p. 4).

These ‘right/wrong’, ‘research based’ and ‘scientific’ discourses surrounding the literacy debate have had a flow-on effect to related arguments on the need for “detailed, concise and unambiguous” (Donnelly, 2005d, p. 14) syllabi in schools. In contrast to “wacky” curricular frameworks that have been criticised for being “broad and nebulous”, “designed to inculcate new-age values” and “politically correct” (ibid, p. 14), a traditional syllabus would leave teachers “in no doubt as to what to teach”. In their ideal world:

There is a syllabus for each year level; teachers are expected to teach, not facilitate; there is regular testing to monitor standards; and the focus is on essential learning ... There is an expectation that students master essential knowledge, understanding and skills at each year level. (Donnelly, 2005d, p. 14)

Donnelly’s call for a ‘teacher friendly’ syllabus looks more like ‘teacher proofing’ schooling, particularly from a federal perspective. Brendan Nelson, for example, when responsible for the federal education portfolio, was vocal in the national press on the need for “state and territory education ministers to get a tighter grip of the school curriculum” (Slattery, 2005b, p. 5) and the importance of exercising “centralised power over curriculum” (Maiden, 2005a, p. 17). Similarly, the current Federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, wants “to take school curriculum out of the hands of the ideologues in the state and territory education bureaucracies and give it to a national board of studies” (Topsfield & Rood, 2006, p. 1). She claims there is a need for a common “commonsense curriculum with agreed cores subjects such as Australian history and a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy” (Topsfield & Rood, 2006, p. 1).

Advocated here are tighter controls by government over school curricula, under the cloak of “giv[ing] parents ‘greater confidence’ in what is being taught in schools” (Topsfield & Rood, 2006, p. 1). The claim is that this requires a curriculum framework that does away with the cultural relativity of post-modern critical theory where notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are not as clear, objective or definitive, and replacing these with the “scientifically credible” and “research-based method” offered by phonics with its much narrower “direct”, “explicit” and “systematic” (Devine, 2006, p. 11) focus on “code-breaking skills” (Maiden, 2005g, p. 3).

Assessment: Centralised Checks-and-Balances

Many of the themes that underpin current debates concerning curriculum also come through in arguments about assessment. For example, “left-wing views of education” are ridiculed as “the politically correct approach” in which “it is wrong to make students learn correct answers” (Donnelly, 2004), questions are “dumbed down”, and exams are made “so user-friendly anyone can succeed” (Donnelly,
Like curriculum, assessment is portrayed as “nebulous” (2005d, p. 14), “subjective” (McIlroy, 2005, p. 11) and littered with “cryptic jargon” (Norrie, 2005, p. 10). Donnelly (2004), for example, argues that “what passes as student assessment is often so vague and nebulous that parents, and students, are unable to get a clear and succinct statement of what has, or has not, been achieved”. Quoting the Commonwealth report on Reporting on School and Student Achievement, Donnelly concurs that “parents consider there is a tendency … to avoid facing or telling hard truths … There is a lack of objective standards that parents can use to determine their children’s attainment and rate of progress”.

Likewise, opponents of the current approach to criterion-based assessment in schools – or “non-competitive” or “non-graded” assessment, as it is more commonly referred to in the popular press (e.g., Donnelly, 2005f, p. 8) – have similarly faulted the model for lacking any “scientific credibility” (Milburn, 2004, p. 6). As Moore’s (1997) disparaging portrayal of criterion-based assessment reads:

The case put by this lobby [who control teaching] in Australia is easily summarised. Norm-referenced tests cause children undue stress and are, in any case, unhelpful. Overseas research studies have limited relevance to us and, unfortunately, research undertaken on local school premises interferes with academic freedom and spontaneity. Educators who want hard evidence of student achievement are thinly disguised reactionaries. Political leaders care only about costcutting – hence whatever they say about failures in school programs should be dismissed without a second thought. (p. 13)

If we follow the argument of Donnelly and others, the solution to present inadequacies with assessment is “graded” measures of attainment. In other words, shifting from the current criterion-based model in which “grades give way to vague and generalised descriptive comments such as ‘attained’, ‘shows evidence’, or ‘not always achieved’” (Donnelly, 2004), to a competitive approach which instead provides an “objective” or, as Donnelly puts it, “fair and honest” measure of success based on how students “rank” in relation to each other. Here, the relationship between assessment and curriculum becomes especially clear, since a ‘competitive’ and ‘objective’ model of assessment leaves no room for ‘relative’ or ‘subjective’ curriculum content. From this perspective, the basis for the determination of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ begins with a curriculum framework that is clear, simple, and unambiguous, not vague, broad or nebulous; in short, a return to “an emphasis on teaching and assessing correct grammar, punctuation and spelling” (Donnelly, 2005b, p. 14).

Here are the spurious foundations for a ‘teacher friendly’ (cf. ‘teacher proof’) framework for schooling referred to earlier in relation to curriculum. Not only will such changes make it possible to get a “tighter grip” (Slattery, 2005b, p. 5) over the nature of the content taught in classrooms, but competitive norm-referenced testing of that content – regardless of state, local, or individual peculiarities – will allow for a national framework of standardized or ‘benchmark’ examinations that can be administered, it is claimed, to all students equitably and without bias. As Donnelly (2004) maintains in response to “left-wing teachers [who] argue that [competitive
assessment] is socially unjust”:

Forgotten is that one of the benefits of a competitive, academic curriculum, when it is allowed to operate, is that it provides a social ladder by which those who are less fortunate can achieve a higher standard of living and a fruitful career. (¶2)

Much of this discourse on competitive assessment focuses on the advantages it has to offer, to parents in particular, in terms of “transparency” and its capacity to reveal the “true level” (Shanahan, 2006, p. 8) of standards in schools. It is a “quest for national uniformity” (Shanahan, 2003, p. 1) in the shape of a national framework of checks·and·balances to redress decades of claimed damage caused by “powerful ideologues [who] have disguised the effects of one of the most appalling con jobs in the history of education ... when hundreds of ordinary children do not know how to write all the letters of the alphabet” (Moore, 1997, p. 13).

Pedagogy: Practical Strategies for the Classroom

While responsibility for perceived problems with school assessment and curricula (described above) are primarily attributed in the data to teachers, problems with teachers’ pedagogy tend to be attributed to the poor standard of their education. In fact, very little direct comment is made about pedagogy itself, with discussions quickly moving on to the inability and/or inattentiveness of universities to provide meaningful instruction about instruction. Hence, teaching styles that were once the staple of popular imageries of schooling – memorisation, rote learning, and testing – are lamented in public debates on the state of pedagogy in schools as having now become “[things] of the past” (Donnelly, 2005f, p. 8). As with the demise of “right or wrong answers” (ibid, p. 8), similarly “ignored is the reality that there is a right and a wrong way to teach” (Donnelly, 2005e, p. 26). Milburn (2004), for example, points out that many graduate teachers report having “no practical strategies to use in the classroom” (p. 6), although her understanding of “practical strategies” is clearly linked with her vision of curriculum, and of literacy in particular:

I’ve had young teachers say they’ve never heard of phonemic awareness,” says Dr Kerry Hempenstall, senior lecturer in psychology at RMIT University, who runs in-service workshops for about 500 primary and secondary teachers each year. “I have a great respect for teachers; it’s the quality of their training that’s the problem. When they’re told what the scientific research says, they’re often upset that they’ve not heard about it before.” (p. 6)

Buckingham similarly lays the blame squarely with those responsible for teacher education. In one recent article, which suggests that not much has changed since a former Victorian Minister for Education, Phil Gude, was quoted as saying almost a decade ago that the problem with education is that “we do not train [teachers] properly” (The Age, July 22, 1997), Buckingham (2005a) accuses universities of
being “negligent”, and asserts that “perhaps the reason teachers claim they had no literacy training is because the training they received was unrecognisable as such, or it was not useful” (p. 18).

In short, the principal criticism lies in the purported “mismatch or disjunction” between universities and classrooms” (Rood, 2005b, p. 3). With the transformation of education faculties into “quasi-sociology departments” (Guerrera, 2005, p. 3; Norrie, 2005, p. 10; Rood, 2005b, p. 3) steeped in “half-baked social theory” (Learning What the Teachers are Taught, 2005, p. 14), the purported problem with teacher preparation is that “teacher training is no longer simply learning how to teach” (Donnelly, 2005h, p. 18). As Donnelly (2005e) argues elsewhere, the educational research upon which teacher education is based is “far removed from the reality of the classroom and the needs of hard-pressed teachers” (p. 26), a critique echoed in Buckingham’s (2004) claims that:

A lot of what goes on in the classroom still lacks a solid empirical-research base. But this may be due to the quality and usefulness of educational research rather than neglect ... Education research has tended to be small case studies, funded as one-off initiatives and not part of a larger research agenda. (p. 14)

Lane (2005) sums up the basic critique made against educational research that underpins teacher education when he writes, “education academics turn out research that bears little relation to classroom reality” (p. 37), citing one example of a teacher who had taken a unit on racism then, when confronted with racism in her classroom, said later: “None of that sociology at university was of any use to me”.

With graduate teachers therefore open to the accusation of being “not ready for reality” (Buckingham, 2005b, p. 7), the solution proposed is a shift from an academic model of teacher “education” to a practice orientated mode of teacher “training”. As Victor Perton, the Victorian Opposition spokesman for Education, argues: “teacher training is exactly that, teacher training, and universities have turned it into a completely academic study” (Rood, 2005a, p. 5). Consequently, calls to increase the number of hours teacher trainees spend in schools saturate the press (Buckingham, 2005b; Jones, 2001; McGilvray, 1999; Rood, 2005a, 2005e), with Jacobsen (1998) noting as much as a decade ago that schools and principals “have been arguing for years that universities really aren’t doing their job, because they had to finish it off for them” (p. 14).

In short, the problem with the state of teaching in schools is portrayed as resting with those responsible for teaching the teachers: “Second-rate sociologists who’d drop dead with fright if parachuted into a Year 9 classroom” (Taylor, 2005, p. 28).

**ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS, TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION**

These calls for reforms to establish *practice* at the “heart” of teacher education (Buckingham, 2005b, p. 7) highlight a number of assumptions about and
implications for how we understand teaching as a profession and, just as importantly, the role of teachers and education in society. Our reading of these assumptions and implications canvasses who is to blame for our current problems, what knowledge and skills are seen to be required to be a teacher, and the nature of education this implies for students and their teachers. Our intention is to uncover the politics that informs the concerns about schooling raised in the media; to highlight these as political matters first and foremost, not just matters of educational debate. In particular, the argument is made that this re-imag(in)ing of teachers (already in progress) is in danger of reducing or narrowing what it means to be a professional teacher, not simply by diffusing the governance of schooling by inserting new voices (of authority) into the mix, but because it renders teachers’ accumulation and generation of knowledge redundant or irrelevant.

Finding Fault

What is not as clearly articulated in the data we canvass above is the shift in responsibility for education away from government to ‘someone else’, although this is certainly implied through the absence of references to government responsibility. As a way of locating the problem, teachers are a logical choice although pragmatically they present as a problem that is difficult to do much about. In part this is because teaching is one of the largest occupations in the nation; the sheer number of teachers mean that any attack on them cannot be sustained long-term: they are well unionised, are in regular contact with and many are well respected by the public, and they would be hard to replace en masse.

In such circumstances, it is far easier and more palatable to blame the education that teachers receive (as illustrated above); hence prescribing the solution to retrain teachers and provide pre-service teachers with a different curriculum. Note, for example, that Julie Bishop’s attack on current school curricula (discussed above) is framed as “directed not at teachers but education bureaucrats” (Topsfield & Rood, 2006, p. 1). If the above accounts are to be believed, teacher trainers are the root of all problems in teaching and the education system as a whole. By taking a position that at least appears sympathetic to teachers, protagonists have been able to argue that the solution for resolving ‘the problem with teachers’ lies with ‘fixing the problem with teacher trainers’.

It is not surprising, then, to find that those responsible for ‘teaching the teachers’ have been maligned throughout these public discourses as ‘second rate’ academics who engage in pointless educational research that apparently lacks ‘scientific credibility’. Indeed, educational research is denigrated as being little more than esoteric fodder which sustains the egos of academics, rather than being concerned with what is best, necessary, or of most use for teachers: a thorough understanding of the content they teach and a set of practical classroom skills. Likewise, teacher trainers are characterised as ‘edu-crats’ whose reality is far removed from that of real classroom concerns, espousing out-dated, irrelevant, and pointless research that lacks any relevance for practice. Teacher trainers – and it is interesting to note that they are almost never referred to as teacher ‘educators’ within any of these
commentaries – are therefore discredited ‘ideologues’ pushing their own political interests: a ‘left-wing’ socialist agenda and subversive political orientations to text and literature in the guise of what they call ‘teacher education’ for the sake of their own conceited status within the academe instead of what ‘really matters’ for teachers in the realities of day-to-day classroom life.

*What’s Worth Knowing?*

What knowledge really matters is a consistent theme in the data. The act of teaching (and therefore teacher development) is portrayed as reducible to the delivery of content knowledge and skills: primarily and narrowly, ‘the basics’ of reading, writing, and numeracy. The underlying assumption is that teaching is the sum of its parts (and no more). Hence, a theory or knowledge of teaching or education more broadly – whether it take the form of ‘half-baked social theory’, ‘quasi-sociology’, ‘mumbo-jumbo’, or ‘edu-babble’ – is seen as unnecessary in teacher preparation and in ongoing professional development.

Iyengar (1991, p. 3) refers to this as the “framing effect” of the media, which (often simplistically) presents problems in ways that “profoundly influence decision outcomes” – in this case, that contemporary education theory is an unnecessary and even unhelpful aspect of teachers’ professional learning – through “subtle alterations in statements” or the “presentation of judgement” in the absence of evidence or even reasoned argument. In our data, journalists often employed dichotomies (“scientific/non-scientific”, “evidenced based/non-evidenced based”) that seemed designed to generate a perception within the public that teaching and teachers’ professional knowledge are somehow ‘soft’, lacking in rigor and credibility.

A further message produced within these discourses is that teachers themselves lack any ability to ‘be professionals’. Repeatedly, they are characterised within these debates – whether implicitly or explicitly – as illiterate, unskilled and incompetent, with a low aptitude for academic excellence as well as an inability to work autonomously unless guided by clear direction from higher authorities. (See Leigh and Ryan (2006) and also endnote (5) below.) This is clearly evident, for example, in calls for curricular reforms by Donnelly and others that take the form of rigidly prescribed “road maps” to ensure teachers have fail-safe directions for classroom instruction. Hence, it is frequently advocated that the responsibility for assessment be shifted to centralised authorities as a check-and-balance measure to hold teachers accountable (especially to parents) for instances of “gross incompetence”. As Lingard (2006, p. 3) notes in relation to England and which also appears evident in the discourses in the Australian press:

Ranson (2003) has shown how a regime of professional accountability has been replaced by a regime of neo-liberal accountability, which has witnessed an increasing specification of curricula and classroom practices, which has reached into the pedagogic core of teachers’ work, as well as ensuring the secret garden of the curriculum is secret no more.
What is 'Education'?

Evident too in these commentaries are messages about the nature of education itself, since this is, essentially, at the heart of teachers’ professional work. As Lingard (2006) argues, “it is through pedagogies that education gets done” (p. 3). On the one hand, the argument is presented that teaching is little more than the black-and-white transfer of skills and traditional discipline, knowledge, and ways of thinking (neo-conservativism) while, on the other, we see calls for a platform of individual competition that would have us believe all things are equal and, hence, naturally ‘just’ (in a neo-liberal sense). Lost in these accounts is any suggestion that education should be emancipatory in its nature, or concerned with social justice, transformation, and redressing social inadequacies.

In taking this position, it has been necessary to reduce the act of teaching to something that appears, at least, to be apolitical. That is, rather than challenging the status quo with critical or transformative orientations as the basis for teacher preparation (i.e., the teaching of critical literacy or pedagogical practices that are conscious of social inequalities and the need for social justice), teaching and teachers’ professional knowledge are characterised as purely instrumental in nature: a set of basic skills and the subject knowledge that is necessary to certify graduates of teacher education programs as being ‘classroom ready’.

CONCLUSION

One conclusion we can reach from reading these media texts is that there is a problem with the teaching in our schools: (i) with what is taught (which is heavily influenced by teachers), (ii) how it is taught (the defining characteristic of teaching) and (iii) how (in what manner and with what result) students’ abilities are assessed (the proxy for measuring teacher and school effectiveness). Problems with the latter are often used to demonstrate the inadequacies of the former two (curriculum and pedagogy). At the very least, recognising this (as a) problem requires a belief in a direct and linear relationship between teaching and learning and that all learning is derived from teaching in the context of schooling. It also requires a belief in decontextualised curriculum, assessment and pedagogy so that when students are assessed for one thing when something else has been taught, their ‘failings’ are attributed to inadequate pedagogies rather than an acknowledgement of legitimate differences across time and space in what is taught and how.

Of course, there are several problems with these conceptions of the problem. One is that what and how teachers teach do not account for all differences in students’ academic achievements. Even the teacher effectiveness literature, which tends to focus narrowly on metrics to make determinations about teaching and learning relationships, reports that “switching from a teacher at the 10th percentile [of teacher quality distribution] to a teacher at the 90th percentile would raise a student from the median [point of student achievement; i.e. the 50th percentile] to the 60th percentile” (Leigh & Ryan, 2006, p. 2). If teaching is the difference and the only variable in student achievement then one could reasonably expect a
greater improvement in their achievement than this.\(^6\) Certainly, the quality of teaching makes a significant difference but it is not the difference (Gale, 2006b; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2005) between poor and outstanding student achievement that is often claimed.\(^7\) A second problem with the ‘teacher problem’ is that Australian students have a history of very high academic achievement in literacy and numeracy compared with students in other OECD countries. For example, in the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests (OECD 2004), Australian students ranked second on literacy and fifth on numeracy among all OECD nations. In such circumstances, claims that all is not well with what is being taught in Australian schools, the performance of its students, the quality of their teachers and, by implication, the quality of teachers’ learning, seems more like media hype. Lynne Kosky, the Victorian Minister for Education, expressed this well in responding to her federal counterpart’s recent call (see above) to centralise the formation of Australian school curricula: “Victoria has record average low class sizes, we have completion rates that are the best of any Australian state, literacy and numeracy rates at or above benchmarks – why should Victorian parents trust Canberra [the city that is home to the nation’s parliament]?” (Topsfield & Rood, 2006, p. 1).

Given the inadequacies of teaching in Australia that are persistently bemoaned in the press, a second and alternative conclusion is that teachers and, particularly, teacher educators can no longer afford to ignore calls in the media for change. This is not simply about ceding to neo-conservative requests; it is more about engaging in debates in the media and developing understandings about how education policy is now formulated and the arenas in which this occurs. In our view, this is the learning that teachers and teacher educators now need. Of course, this is not to discount the critique (some of it valid) offered regarding teaching and teacher education. We cannot continue to stall on addressing problems within Australian teacher education (Mitchell, Murray & Nuttall, 2006). And there is work to do on the teaching front as well. However, addressing these matters in themselves will not guarantee well-informed teaching and teacher education policy and practice. We also need to engage with contexts of influence in the production of messages for policy, as cognitive activists. Elsewhere Gale (2006a) has argued that cognitive policy activists are:

\[\ldots\] in the business of taking their laboratories to the farm, as Bruno Latour (1983) would say. This requires translating the central concepts of a critical education science into terms used by the dominant, so that working on their terms is also working on the field. The place to begin is not with their framing but with one’s own and then to reconceive of the relative importance of these terms in keeping with one’s own frame. Having made the translation, the task becomes one of naming what the field lacks and then to become the source of its resolution. (p. 10)

The “new basics” conceived by Allan Luke as Deputy Director of Education Queensland in the wake of and building on the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard et al., 2001) is a good example of this cognitive
policy activism at work. Utilising neo-conservative terms, the "new basics" agenda attempted to reconfigure traditional notions of school curricula to address a globalised world and new knowledge forms seen to be important for students' futures. It was successful in a way that many other curriculum reforms have not been and within a broader neo-conservative climate. Further and perhaps one reason for its success is that teachers in the state were encouraged to contribute to its conceptualisation and implementation in schools. In contexts of influence, then, "framing is more about constructing the right place to be in, rather than waiting for some serendipitous moment that thrusts us into the spotlight for all the right reasons" (Gale, 2006a, p. 9). This is the kind of engagement with education commentary in the media now required of teachers and teacher educators.

NOTES

1 We wish to acknowledge Scott Bulfin's contributions to an early conversation conceptualising aspects of this chapter.
2 This is a telling echo of the three 'Rs' of a traditional education (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic).
3 A related yet nevertheless distinct field from education, as Ladwig (1994) has argued in relation to the US context.
4 In 2004, 2.7 percent of the Australian workforce or 264,919 (233,065 equivalent full-time) people were teachers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools, Australia 2004. Cat. No. 4221.0 Table 64.)
5 We quote this DEST commissioned report with some trepidation. It laments the decline in teachers' "academic aptitude" (a proxy it uses for teacher quality) over the last twenty years, measured (narrowly) as "the literacy and numeracy performance of teachers in standardized tests while they were themselves at school" (Leigh & Ryan, 2006, pp. 5-6) and "assumes that the [academic] aptitude of an individual teacher does not change over time" (p. 6). It then speculates that teachers' aptitude could be increased (despite the assumption that this remained constant in the populations studied) by the introduction of merit or performance pay, even though this has not proven to be successful in the US.
6 One Australian independent school recently found itself on the receiving end of a lawsuit instigated by a parent of one of its students, because the school had claimed it could teach children to read but the child in question remained largely illiterate. The matter was resolved out of court.
7 The Australian Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) website quotes teacher effectiveness research suggesting that up to 70% of the variation in students' academic achievement can be attributed to teacher practices.

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