A high school teacher’s experience of local school management: A case of the ‘system behaving badly towards teachers’  

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The move to local school management (LSM) in its various formations is one of the most significant educational policy moves to occur in recent times in western countries. Although something is known about the effects on governance, budgeting and resource decision making, relatively little is known about the rhetorical and actual ways teachers’ work is affected. Even the proponents admit this, albeit in terms of the little known relay effect on student learning. Drawing on the narrative biography of a single high school teacher, as part of a larger multi-sited ethnography, this study revealed the level of policy incoherence to be such that most of the worst excesses of accountability and marketisation accompanying LSM were minimised. Emerging from a deeply held set of pedagogical values and convictions, this instance confirmed a robust view of teacher identity as lying beyond those of victim construction.

Introduction

There is a struggle going on at the moment, in most western countries, over the meaning of local school management (LSM), with consequences that may not become fully evident for some time (see Halpin & Moore with Edwards, George, & Jones, 2000; Levacic, 1998; Levacic & Hardman, 1999; Marren & Levacic, 1994). In many respects, LSM presents as an apparently benign concept of school governance involving ‘steering at a distance’ (Ball, 1997; Kickert, 1993). It is seen as a ‘policy ensemble’ (Ball, 1999, p. 3) of devolved school management set within a wider ‘policy constellation’ (Whitty & Power, 2000, p. 93) of accountability frameworks and performance indicators. Such official interpretations of LSM embrace global budgeting, responsiveness of schools to their local communities, stringent accountability requirements, and resourcing schools according to student enrolments determined by parental choice. Within this view, schools appear to be offered certain freedoms, in return for being accountable for meeting agreed-upon goals. But the reality of what is being managed may be more ‘fleeting’, ‘fugitive’, and ‘contingent’ (Harvey, 1990, p. 519).

What we are not hearing much about is the way in which LSM operates as a policy trajectory to construct teachers in a particular way—and how these manoeuvres are being resisted, accommodated, or appropriated by teachers.
themselves. Far from there being a universally agreed upon single meaning of LSM as a policy initiative (Caldwell & Hayward, 1998; Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, 1998), what we have are a number of conflicting, contradictory and competing views (Angus, 1994; Blackmore, 1999; Blackmore, Bigum, Hodgens, & Laskey, 1996; Codd, Gordon, & Harker, 1997; Smyth, 1993; Townsend, 1997), each of which seeks to shape teachers’ subjectivities in particular ways. What is being created in/buy policy relays like LSM are ‘oppositional identities’ in which teachers actively engage in ‘acts of refusal’ (Schultz, 1999, p. 83) that constitute identity narratives of what it means to be a successful teacher. There is ‘a struggle for identities’ (duGay, 1991, pp. 53–54) as teachers work within the notion of the devolved school to recast the meaning of LSM in the context of what it means to live a teaching life. It is hardly surprising that teachers are resisting futures that others are constructing for them.

A caveat is in order here. Because of the nature of the phenomenon, I will follow somewhat in the footsteps of Willmott (1993), in that ‘the dominant tone of this article [will be] unashamedly polemical’ (p. 535); there is a certain inevitability about such an approach, when what is being studied amounts to a process of ‘seduction’, ‘resistance’ and ‘entrapment’. With those limitations in mind, I will explore how LSM has the rhetorical effect of attempting to construct the teacher as a particular type of person—but a construction that is not unproblematic (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). Teachers are continually constructing biographies for themselves that are relational, pedagogical and educative—and these can often be in tension and at variance with the wider official policy aspirations and images of schools as entrepreneurial, responsive, competitive, stand-alone, cost centres.

One thing that is becoming clear is that policy processes like that of LSM (or the self-managing school) have widespread appeal because they constitute somewhat flexible and diffuse categories capable of multiple interpretations. Lingard, Hayes, and Mills (1999), invoking Rizvi (1994), have argued that ‘school-based management has no stipulative meaning but rather ... is a concept that is rearticulated over time in changing political contexts, while also being contested at any time’ (p. 1). As Lingard, Hayes, and Mills (1999) put it: ‘As with most policies ... school-based management statements involve a suturing together of multiple and competing discourses’ (p. 1). The aim of this paper is to explore what the move to LSM meant in the context of a high school, and how LSM works on/through the subjectivity of the teacher.

**Something about methodology**

The case reported here is part of a three-year Australian Research Council funded study into the ‘Policy effects of school-based management on teachers’ work’. The suite of studies that comprised the larger study, of which this is a part, constituted what Marcus (1998) refers to as a ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (see Hattam, 2002; Smyth, 2002b, 2002c; McInerney, 2002 for other aspects of this study).

The research method used, as in the study as a whole, was in the tradition of a critical policy ethnography (Burawoy et al., 1991; 2000)—it was seeking to get
inside a global issue using the fieldwork technique of ‘extended case method’ (Buurwok, 1991, pp. 271-287) and ‘multi-sited’ ‘place-focussed ethnographic narrative’ (Marcus, 1998, p. 53). This style of research gives prominence to the ‘forces, connections and imaginations’ (Buurwok et al., 2000, p. 28) that enable challenge, elaboration and reconstruction of existing theory. The intent is to move beyond regarding global forces as inevitable, natural or inexorable, and to see them rather as ‘the product of contingent social processes’ (p. 29) and, as such, contestable. The approach that best lends itself to this is an ‘event- or case-centred’ (p. 27) approach that listens to a single or a small number of informants, so as to get inside their stories, personal reflections and in-depth understandings. The particular instance of the experiences of the teacher portrayed in this paper was part of a year-long habitation (2000-2001) of the school for extended periods, interviewing, observing in all kinds of settings, and repeatedly returning to the school for elaboration, clarification, and to check out the veracity of findings.

While there were six or seven teachers who provided a wealth of insight and depth of understanding about the policy initiative and how it was impacting on their work, in the end, for the purposes of this paper, a pragmatic decision had to be taken about allowing only one teacher to speak, and for others to tell their stories at some other time. The study also had to confront the complexities (Jipson & Paley, 1997; Lee, 1993; McLaughlin & Tierney, 1993; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997) of doing politically sensitive research (see Smyth, 2002), and revealing ‘inside stories’ (Bennett deMarrais, 1998) others would rather not hear.

**Snapshot of Old Times/New Times (OT/NT) High School**

In the particular instance discussed here, OT/NT High is a large metropolitan Australian secondary school of some 1000 students, with a long tradition as a conservative school, which, in more recent times, has come to attract a varied multicultural mix of students. Over 40 nationalities are represented, 70 per cent of students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds, seven different languages are taught in the school, and around 60 per cent of students qualify for government assistance. Because of the school’s long history (prefects, house system, strong inter-school sporting activities), it has considerable appeal to parents who regard the school as having ‘worked’ for previous generations of students, and who want their off-spring to obtain a similarly ‘good’ grounding for life.

At the time of the research, OT/NT High was struggling with whether or not to embrace an official option to become a self-managing school, in the sense of having more control over financial resources and decision-making processes. The school had rejected the option after protracted and heated discussions although, at the level of the governing council, there was still strong support for the idea. At the level of the teaching staff, there was a substantial process under way to try to modernise the content of the curriculum and the way it was taught at the Year 10 level, by using a professional development process involving groups of teachers in dialogical self-managing learning teams.

The unwillingness of teachers to embrace the official version of LMS on offer
seemed not to be so much an outright rejection of change but rather an opportunity to be seized upon by the teachers from which they could craft an alternative—one that was much more of their own making. It seemed as though some teachers at the school were interpreting the overall ideological drift towards LSM as an opportunity to leverage some space within which to sustain and maintain educative relationships and pedagogic discussions. Put another way, among some teachers there was a view that LSM meant capitalising on opportunities to advance a view of ‘good pedagogy’. It was seen as a rare opportunity in some quarters within the school for teachers to exercise some agency within a ‘system [that was] behaving badly towards teachers’, as one teacher so delightfully put it.

At the level of middle managers and curriculum co-ordinators in the school, LSM presented a potentially contradictory set of possibilities—on the one hand, it was a case of working within a mandatory externally formulated curriculum framework, and at the same time obtaining the resources with which to use collegial learning teams to advance progressive ideas, for example, around ‘constructivist’ views of learning. A particularly good example was the effort to try to use self-managing learning teams within the school to inject ‘student voice’ into the curriculum as a way of re-engaging Year 10 students who had become switched off school.

At the level of the senior leadership and administration of the school, LSM meant something different again. For them, even though the school had not bought into the officially sanctioned version of LSM, it had adopted some of the rhetoric and was taking advantage of the new relationships that were being forged with the centre (the central education department). Some of the issues for them were: a redefining of leadership; maintaining the school tradition; staffing practices of the school that reflected private sector ideologies; marketing and promoting the image of the school; asset management planning; and trying to promote conditions generally supportive of good pedagogy. All of this was happening within a context in which there were substantial debates around what it meant to be a teacher in changing times.

**Emerging new teacher subjectivities: Some theoretical issues**

This section will try to pick up on Ball’s (1994) argument of the need to explore ‘how we might begin to conceptualize policy effects in a way that is neither theoretically high-handed nor trivializing’ (p. 24). This means confronting the teacher as ‘an absent presence in the discourses of education policy, an object rather than a subject of discourse’ (p. 50). But, as Ball (1994) also argues, this will require a more sophisticated approach than ‘idealizing the past and portraying a situation in which teachers once had autonomy, and now do not’ (p. 25). What needs exploration is ‘localized complexity’ (p. 14) with all of its messiness, confusion and contradictions.

To understand the complexity of a major policy shift like LSM, it is necessary to see it in the much wider context of what Casey (1995) described, in the title of her book, as *Work, self and society*. Casey’s argument is that we need to
describe and analyse the relationship between the new work order of teachers, teachers' own self-formations, and the way both of these are embedded in regimes of broader social change. In other words, there is need for a 'critical theorizing of [teachers'] work as a path to understanding the self-society relation in contemporary social conditions' (p. 6), especially in circumstances of enhanced school self-responsibilisation as is occurring in moves to LSM. There is need to analyse how the materiality as well as teachers' imaginings of their work is being affected under the rhetoric and conditions of LSM, and to understand how they experience, appreciate and transform that work.

The sociological and theoretical category I therefore want to carry, in the wider debate over moves to local school management, might be broadly described as the 'struggle for subjectivity' (McDonald, 1999). What is happening to teachers at a policy level involves a set of processes that Touraine (1998) referred to as 'the end of coherence or integration of national industrial societies, and [of] living a process of "demodernisation" marked by globalisation, on the one hand, and increased fragmentation of identities on the other' (McDonald, 1999, p. 5). As McDonald put it: 'once-coherent spaces, times and societies' (p. 5) are experiencing incongruous dual processes of 'deinstitutionalisation' and 'desocialisation'.

The category of 'identity work' (Fraser, Davis, & Singh, 1997; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Wexler, 1992) captures the struggle against 'discrediting attributes' that come with the territory of attributed 'denigrating [or] stigmatized status' (Fraser et al., 1997, p. 222)—as is currently occurring with teachers. The literature on identity work makes it clear that not only are identities 'ongoing, tentative, changing, and dynamic', but they are 'assembled or constructed by selves and others' (p. 222) often in oppositional, contingent and shifting ways. Social, cultural, organisational and policy environments powerfully shape and strategically work on actors in ways that amount to them revising their biographies according to circumstances, audiences and surroundings, but often in counter hegemonic ways that push back into those conditions. As Snow and Anderson (1987) put it, identity work has various elements to it—'distancing' or a kind of denial based upon difference from others; 'embracement' that amounts to acceptance and attachment; and 'fictive story telling', involving exaggerations, embellishment and fantasising—each of which serves to enable teachers to manage the deformed images and 'spoiled identities' (Goffman, 1963) reflected back to them through educational reforms like those of the self-managing school.

In trying to make sense of what is happening to teachers' lives and work in the context of moves towards LSM, I want to focus on the '(inter)subjective processes that constitute a sense of identity within organisational life' (Whitehead, 1998, p. 199)—in this case, of a high school. Following Whitehead (1998), I argue that, by focusing on the 'power/resistance' nexus, it is possible to understand the disruptions, eruptions, contradictions and the tensions being played out as a consequence of moves to LSM. Indeed it is this potential to be constructive as well as disruptive that gives identity work its potency. The challenge is to identify and represent both the positive as well as the oppressive aspects of the turn to LSM in schools. Whitehead (1998) is helpful in this:
These possibilities emerge and are in part constructed by the subject, not necessarily as rational strategies, but as the very effects and consequences of the multiplicity of self... This is not to discount the power effects of privileged knowledges... nor their potentially oppressive characteristics, but rather to point to the moments when privileged knowledges shift, become unsustainable or are reconstituted by the individual within, yet also outside of, prevailing power regimes. Partly as a direct consequence of the unpredictability of intersubjectivity, the organisational arena remains exposed to subversive moments and practices, largely outside the control of any predetermined management strategy. Much of managerial labour, it is argued, is subsequently engaged in attempting to manage and control this unpredictability, a task that can never be wholly accomplished in spite of strenuous efforts by management... to achieve closure and determination. (p. 199)

A theoretical conundrum

In what follows I shall struggle over what appears to be a theoretical and philosophical contradiction in the literature on identity which, on the one hand, posits it as being multiple, contradictory and indeterminate, but still having leeway for teacher agency. On the other hand, there are traces in the literature of a much more sober view of identity as being institutionally imposed, but which even here still provides a modicum of room for manoeuvre and construction by teachers.

One way in which to try and sort out this confusion is to draw on Touraine (1998) who explains this contradiction in terms of ‘a hostile juxtaposition of... cultural tendencies and their reconciliation’ (p. 166). He argues that the conflict here is over ‘objectivism and subjectivism’ (p. 167).

On the one hand, we act as both players and pawns in the great game of the world economy; on the other, we no longer construct our identities on the basis of our social roles but on the basis of our individuality. (p. 166)

McDonald (1999) makes the similar point that the weakening of social institutions brings with it ‘the increasingly problematic character of individual experience in contemporary culture’ (p. 6).

Personal experience is less held together by social institutions; instead, individuals find themselves in a social world made up of diverging and increasingly incoherent social logics from which each must construct a coherent and unified experience. (p. 6)

In other words, these moves do not so much represent ‘a retreat into the private [so much as a] rise of a mode of experience where individuals are increasingly called upon to be “entrepreneurs of the self”’ (p. 6). Gordon (1991) calls this the ‘enterprising of oneself’, or ‘the managerialization of personal identity and personal relations’ (p. 44). But there are limits to this, of course, as Willmott (1993) notes: ‘“self-direction” is commended but, crucially, its scope and course is dictated and directed by the construction of employee commitment to core corporate values’ (p. 524).

Bringing schools into this theorising, there is a set of forces working on
teachers in the devolving school to *de-institutionalise* them—in the sense of re-working (but not dismantling or diminishing) the relationship between the school and the central educational bureaucracy. The policy trajectory of de-institutionalisation is one in which schools are increasingly expected to be stand-alone budget and cost centres, in which they are being urged to pursue ‘market share’ in attracting students upon which funding depends, and in which the image is one of the self-managing entrepreneurial school, responding innovatively to wider community and national needs. Accompanying this is a downsizing of systemic support for teachers’ work in a context in which schools are expected to ‘work it out locally’. Control under these circumstances is intensified (Smyth, 2001; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998).

On the other hand, and operating simultaneously, these same forces are producing a *re-institutionalisation* and strengthening of the relationship between teachers at the level of the school and the educational system. What is promulgated is a culture of performativity and accountability that is predisposed towards narrowing, constraining, scripting and ritualising teacher–student relationships. Analysis of this kind highlights the as yet unresolved tensions in the sociological analysis of work around what Ezzy (1997) refers to as ‘the problem of how to conceptualise alienating, as opposed to liberating or “good” work’ (p. 427).

Technologies of control as they existed in the old Fordist work order, predicated largely on the basis of fear and compulsion, are breaking down. Although these forms have by no means completely disappeared, by contrast, recent forms of work control are increasingly based on ‘normative methods of control’ in which the worker is constructed as a ‘consumer’ rather than a ‘producer’ (p. 430). As Ezzy (1997) put it, ‘the emphasis is on constructing oneself’ (p. 430) and, in this quest for mutuality, ‘both management and the worker want to find fulﬁlment in the job. Self-understandings are both discovered and developed at work’ (p. 430). The focus is upon encouraging workers to ‘internalise ... goals and values’ and to ‘develop a strong emotional attachment to the organization’, obviating the need for bureaucratic forms of control or ‘financial threats and rewards’ (p. 431). Within this more sophisticated conception, workers are not simply passive operators, but active agents in adapting, manipulating, and modifying ‘the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. xvi). Ezzy (1997) argues that workers do this in the way they develop and pursue ‘narrative identities’ of themselves as a way of handling the ‘dialectic of acceptance, resistance and manipulation’ (p. 432).

Having highlighted but not resolved this theoretical tension in the literature, my own inclination is to favour a somewhat more evenly balanced sense of the institution-agency dialectic because of the way students, teachers, parents and policy makers try to navigate pathways through and around policy regimes.

**Picking through the everyday realities: Teaching as a social practice at Old Times/New Times High School**

For teachers at OT/NT High School, what this meant was that the work of teaching was ‘not simply determined by, and a reflection of, pre-existing cultural
discourses' (Ezzy, 1997, p. 440). In other words, the educational discourses and practices of self-management coming to surround the work of teaching are deeply interwoven with teachers' own narrative conceptions of their identities. Like most of us, teachers are storied beings. Their lives are grounded in quite sophisticated narratives of what it means to be a teacher, how they came to be the way they are, and how to sustain and maintain those notions. Their self-narrated biographies have occurred within different temporal and institutional structures, varying policy regimes, and intersected with the lives of a variety of other teachers. As Brooks put it: 'We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersections of several stories not yet completed' (cited in Schultz, 1999, p. 83).

Ezzy (1998) has argued that narrative identities are constructed intersubjectively: 'Narrative identity is coherent but fluid and changeable, historically grounded but “fictively” reinterpreted, constructed by an individual, but constructed in interaction and dialogue with other people' (p. 6). Narrative identities are not solely personal constructions either, but are produced through the integration of social networks, lived experiences, and the influence of power and sedimented social organisation, and 'are sustained and transformed through the influence of social relationships as mediated by institutional structures' (p. 9).

When asked how the turn to LSM was affecting them, teachers at OT/NT High School responded by talking (often effusively, and with some nostalgia) about their careers in teaching. They described what was happening to them at the moment in terms of where current reforms sat in their own personal histories, careers and their institutional contexts as teachers.

A 'career' is a label for a work based narrative-identity. A 'career' is constructed out of a story about where a person has been, what they are doing now, and what they are likely to do in the future. (Ezzy, 1997, p. 436)

The general picture that emerged from OT/NT High was one in which teachers expressed high levels of cynicism in respect of both the nature, likely success and possible longevity of externally initiated reforms. Coupled with the anger about wasted resources, energy and time that was required to be put into 'systems imperatives' was the frustration that the real concerns of teachers went largely unattended. The targeting of resources at priorities that were not their own seemed to coincide for these teachers with a circumstance in which they were literally drowning in a sea of external reforms, which seemed a long way removed from the promises of self-management. The picture given by teachers at OT/NT High was one in which the devolved or self-managing school potentially involved the worst of both worlds. On the one hand, there was the loss of resources that in the past had historically supported the work of teachers in terms of curriculum support and ways of improving classroom practices. On the other hand, there was a plethora of centrally imposed frameworks which teachers had no opportunity to shape, and where professional development opportunities were desultory. Teacher autonomy could thus seem to have a somewhat hollow ring to it. Opportunities
available to teachers were circumscribed and the apparent existential reality for teachers was one of abandonment, desertion, and feelings of being cut loose.

In what follows, in accessing what teachers said, I employ Mishler’s (1999) notion of ‘storylines’, as a way of studying ‘how we speak our identities’ (p. 19). Like Mishler, I’m interested in the continuities, the disruptions, the discontinuities, coherences and tensions that might be involved in (re)theorising and understanding the dislocation of teacher professional identity occurring around school reform. Having a relational view of identity—one that is capable of speaking back as Langman and Scatamburlo (1996) put it—means having a mode of interpretation that is dialectical, and that emphasises ‘locating selves and various identity functions within broader political, economic and cultural contexts’ (p. 128).

Interviews with 13 teachers at OT/NT High (including the leadership team) gave valuable insights into how they engaged in a process of ‘becoming somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) as they drew on their biographies to interpret, make sense of, and to craft an alternative response to the official version of LSM threatening to engulf them. Because of the richness and complexity of the data, discussion will be limited to the experiences of one teacher over two intensive one-hour interviews. Having one key informant who articulates a storyline, enables a more focused and coherent account of how LSM was experienced and what it was doing to at least one teacher’s identity formation.

**Early lessons in ‘living a divided life’(Palmer, 1998)**

Stephen (not his real name) came to secondary teaching in the early 1980s after six years teaching as a primary teacher, but in this time he had taught children from kindergarten to Year 12. These early years of his teaching had been in rural disadvantaged communities, with high levels of poverty, teenage unemployment of up to 45 per cent, adult unemployment over 20 per cent, third generation unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, and high levels of school absenteeism. He admitted that these formative years, although crucial in shaping the way he thought about teaching, also resulted in him taking quite a while ‘to come to grips with the culture of secondary schools’ [Interview #1, p. 1]. These early years enabled him to experience the inability of politicians and systems bureaucrats to deliver even minimalist expectations. There was high teacher turnover and an official incapacity to deal with it. As the person responsible for the school timetable, he was averaging 75–80 hours of work a week, in a context where ‘politicians had made lots of promises about new classrooms and facilities … but little transpired’. ‘In the first year I did the timetable, we had six teachers that hadn’t been appointed when we went back to school … We had this on-going debate with the Department: “Okay, if there’s not a teacher shortage, how come you can’t find us a teacher?”’. Experience was teaching him an important lesson: ‘I had a strong feeling that politicians and education bureaucrats were pushing an economic rationalist agenda—their success depended on it’. He experienced failed amalgamations and budgetary slash-and-burn approaches in which the only outcomes were that schools were closed ‘falling into rack and ruin—a waste of a valuable community resource’. During this period, he
experienced growing levels of frustration with the way schools were being treated: 'In the end the lack of staffing, the lack of support, the lack of money ... conspired against us. No matter where you went you just couldn’t get a sausage' [Interview #1, p. 2].

Frustrated because his own children, now in their teenage years, were suffering from the same set of circumstances of high teacher turnover, inability to get resources, etc., he returned to the metropolitan area and to his current school. PT/NT High. The paradox was that, despite frustration with the way schools were being administered, and his attempt to do something about it as a local school administrator, his efforts had not amounted to anything:

I came back as a teacher really disillusioned with the administration of schools. I couldn’t see that I was making any impact as an administrator of the school. In the end I was just trying to do everything with nothing. In all of this mess the one thing that I still enjoyed was teaching. It saved my sanity. I made a conscious decision to come back to a classroom. [Interview #1, p. 3]

Succeeding despite the system: Re-focusing reform on the classroom

Stephen’s view of the way to redefine the ethos of ‘self-responsibilisation’ confronting schools was to start by carefully analysing and assessing what was working within the school, and in respect of his own teaching. Reflecting back on the inability of change to occur administratively or by fiat, he could see that the only feasible option was to theorise his way out of it. Along the way, he needed to avail himself of whatever opportunities and resources were available to him in his new setting. This is to acknowledge Snow and Anderson’s (1987) earlier point that identity formation is about securing the necessary resources (cultural, social and symbolic) with which to strategically engage in identity work as a teacher. Stephen’s analysis went like this:

I enjoyed the fact that there seemed to be a calmness and serenity about the school that I had not experienced for quite some time. I sat back and looked and had a think ... and re-connected with my craft.

The great thing about going to a new school is that you can reflect on practices and start doing some new things.

I found out that you need to be absolutely clear about the role and what you did in those roles. It’s all about explicit teaching. Don’t assume that kids are group workers. You can’t assume that kids have been taught how to work in groups.

You need to be absolutely explicit about what group work means.

I am an eclectic teacher—I take bits and pieces from everywhere.

From teaching primary students I became really aware of the importance of giving instruction. In secondary teaching these are often taken for granted ... kids don’t write down instructions. You have to teach kids how to listen. Junior primary teachers do it all the time.

What we witness being rehearsed here is narrative biography that is affirming the
essence of what it means to be a teacher, in a context of policy disruptions and
eruptions that is pushing teachers in the direction of being technicians.

Having established the centrality of pedagogical matters to classroom
reform, Stephen went on to fire a final broadside at the inability of reform efforts
orchestrated from outside of classrooms:

Any change that is going to happen in education is not going to happen because
[Bruce] the wanker [reference to a senior educational policy maker] . . . decides
that we're going to have statements and profiles or whatever . . . those things
have so little impact in the classroom because at the end of the day the real
revolution that's going to take place . . . is about how we teach, but it can only
happen if teachers in classrooms get the time and support to do it. [Interview
#1, p. 4]

Here we see the working of what was described earlier in the theoretical section
as the re-working of the relationship between the school (and at least one of its
teachers) and the bureaucratic centre, as the latter is re-fashioned into what Seddon
(1995) has termed a 'policy husk'. Teachers like Stephen experience this re-worked
relationship as a withdrawal of the structures of support for their work, and
the substitution in its place of a curriculum accountability framework. The
response, as we see, is a covert subversion of management's intent.

Stephen was also able to be articulate about the way in which power/
resistance operated—namely, that even in oppressive circumstances there were
always positive opportunities waiting to be seized upon. He saw these as being part
of the same linked couplet. Referring to the actions of the CEO and the effects
policies were having on teachers, he said:

[He] is allegedly more hairy chested and macho and he's going to make people
do it. The fact is that all he is doing is taking money out of the system. He is
not making teachers do anything other than be counting the days till they can
get out. Lots of teachers both here and elsewhere have become so disen-
franchised—so powerless and so 'not listened to'—and principals have become
so terrified. [Interview #1, p. 5]

It was clear to Stephen that the current externally driven reform agenda, of
which moves to LSM were a part, was deeply flawed. There are clearly shades, in
his comment below, of the way in which policy was referred to earlier in this paper
as being treated perfunctorily, as teachers like Stephen have little apparent diffi-
culty in countering its technical rationality intent and its attempt to impose a bland
'culture of conformity' (Hayes, 2001), simply by asserting the importance of
teachers own pedagogical values. 'Current mandated reforms are not well thought
out; have little to do with the education of kids; offer little for kids in poverty'
[Interview #2, p. 1]. 'I think lots of curriculum change isn't really based around
that, it's about accountability. It's about putting kids in boxes ... it's not really
about changing practice. If it was, they would resource it [Interview #2, p. 3].

As the theoretical material asserted earlier, even within these apparently
'incoherent social logics', there are spaces for 'subversive moments' outside of the
management logic within which teachers are able to assert and maintain their own
imaginings based on their self-formation as teachers—in this instance, around visions of leadership embedded in, rather than disconnected from, the pedagogical agenda of the school. Recounting the vision of the previous assistant principal at OT/NT High, Stephen was able to point to where he saw the real possibilities for change lay, and why. He was able to describe the model of leadership used on that occasion, and the person and resource skills necessary to enact it:

If there is really going to be any significant change about how teaching and learning was done at OT/NT it really had to be done by the people who were there in the classrooms so teachers had to do it. He initiated the idea of the self-managing teams where teachers actually took responsibility for their own project. They were with a group of people but there was no formal leadership structure as such. While someone had overall responsibility for administration it was mainly a go-between [Keith] who managed the money and the group. People who had been involved in any sort of classroom investigation were given a lot of freedom to experiment. [Interview #2, p. 2]

One of those rare people who have a really good handle on learning and teaching... but he has also got a really good set of management skills to go with it. Often in schools principals have management skills but are not good educational leaders. They seem to be managing the implementation handed to them rather than trying to lead, interpret and develop policy and to contextualise that for the school that they’re in. [Interview #2, p. 2]

This was especially important at OT/NT High because change was slow in this deeply conservative and traditional school: ‘As new teachers have come in... there is a growing challenge to that traditional academic orthodoxy’ [Interview #2, p. 3]. Purposeful leadership of this type not only requires a certain kind of commitment, it is also demanding of time and resources that are essential to its success:

In a place where teachers come and go there needs to be common resources that teachers can draw on. Teachers need time to learn how to develop curriculum; how to negotiate with kids and work out what works with particular groups of kids. Beginning teachers need a lot of support and resources to develop these skills. School leaders need to take this on as a major responsibility. [Interview #2, p. 9]

But this is quite contrary to the model of leadership prevailing under the external LSM reform model which, as Stephen pointed out, is based on the separationist principle:

Principals have been moved away from their staff. They have been isolated as a deliberate strategy where they are made to feel that they are no longer members of their school staff. They belong to a group of managers that have this overall insight. Their main role now... is the implementation of centrally mandated policy. They don’t have any choice. [Interview #2, p. 14]

Principals are no longer educational leaders because they are caught up with management issues. More concerned with how they can save money than improving education for kids... Effectively it has removed them from the educational orbit in the school. [Interview #2, p. 16]
What is being played out here is a policy de-institutionalisation of a set of historically authentic professional relationships between teachers and principals, and their re-institutionalisation in the form of a sanitised and synthetic performative relationships held in place by what Codd (1999) refers to as a ‘culture of mistrust’. One of the consequences is the enactment of a performative charade:

What you get is pretend implementation. Principals often spend a lot of energy implementing new policies/programs which all fall down when they leave the school . . . all they have is pretend compliance.

Yes I’ll do what you tell me. I don’t like. I don’t agree with it but you’re making me do it. And I’m not going to resist you. [Interview #2, p. 14]

What holds this charade in place is the perpetuation of a corporate view of leadership, of how a good corporate principal should operate. The management style is linear—‘I’ll tell you, you tell them, and they’ll tell someone else, and that’s how the message gets translated . . . which is at odds with talk about flat management, teams, devolution of responsibility and two-way consultation’ [Interview #2, p. 20]. The emphasis is on masculinist, muscular, model of decisiveness: ‘Lead from the front; stick to your guns; be a man; make a real decision’ [Interview #2, p. 21].

Supporting evidence can be found in the way professional development for teachers is re-interpreted, away from the notion of being supportive of the work of teachers, and instead as a mechanism in support of government policy. Stephen recounts an ‘unmitigatingly awful’ instance he experienced of a curriculum workshop he was compelled to attend, after which he and a group of colleagues approached the principal and said: ‘Look if you ever put me through that again I’m going to walk out’.

I read and told jokes and did all the things that naughty children do in class. [We were given a package] that ignored the fact that we might actually know something about the topic . . . So you start off with ‘What is learning?’. I mean *** off, how many more times do you have to go to a conference and talk to a person next to you about what is learning. Don’t treat me like a cretin. [Interview #2, p. 12]

Far from dealing with issues of improving teaching and learning, from the vantage point of teachers, the model of LSM on offer from the system appeared to be more about the system escaping responsibilities:

It was more about trying to absolve themselves of a whole range of financial and bureaucratic responsibilities that they wanted to push on the school and quite frankly our school wasn’t ready to do that. We have many more pressing issues in terms of teaching and learning. [Interview #2, p. 18]

At the level of teachers, there was an accommodation ritual enacted that went like this:

‘Yes, I’ll play the supervision game but only to the point where you leave me alone.’ You will get what I call ‘minimum level compliance’. Rather than outwardly resist . . . like I think, 10 years ago we would have said, ‘Stick it up your
as. I'm not going to do it.’ . . . What actually happens is that people have taken
the path of least resistance. So what they do is that they pretend to comply.
[Interview #2, p. 11]

The significant point to be taken from the experience of this teacher is that
teachers are not simply being determined in some linear fashion by institutional
expectations encoded within policy moves like LSM, but they resist, transform and
mediate these expectations through narrations of professional pedagogical identity
and values. In other words, the neo-liberal project being constructed through LSM
around individualism, market forces and educational consumption appears far less
stable and more contingent than the policy discourses suggest. What appears at first
glance to be inexorable becomes much less determinant in the light of teachers’
actual experiences that reveal significant reflexivity and professional ‘capacity-

Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide some tentative insights into the experiences of
one classroom teacher around a policy attempt to move schools in the direction of
becoming self-managing. Although the school did not experience the full effect of
coming within the orbit of an officially sanctioned LSM policy, it was nevertheless
clear from the experience of one teacher that the ideology that comes with
rhetoric of the self-managing school is becoming pervasive. He was able to speak
of the way in which the education system had progressively distanced itself from
any real concern or commitment to him as a teacher or the pedagogical plight of
him and his colleagues, and what this meant to the way they thought and acted as
teachers.

In place of attempts to support the day-to-day work of teachers, there
appeared to be an official view that as long as the outputs of teaching are tested,
measured and made accountable, then teaching will take care of itself, and worry-
ning about the mystery or complexity of how or why learning occurs is unneces-
sary. Far from being victims in this process, some teachers were able to construct
for themselves a coherent vision around the importance of continuing to pursue
relationships with students that resulted in them doing good work.

It was clear from the informant in this case that the reclamation had to be
pedagogical, and that in the process as a teacher he had to draw extensively and
innovatively on his professional biography to construct a teaching life that ran
counter to prevailing tendencies. It was hard not to form the view from the pre-
valing storyline, that the new work order being constructed was one in which the
real agenda was one in which teachers were expected to carve new identities for
themselves around markets; choice, standards and accountability. Messy and com-
plex moral and ethical issues about social exclusion and social justice appeared to
be irrelevant to concerns around individual consumption. Within this there was,
nevertheless, a courageous, hopeful, even heroic attempt by one teacher (along
with his colleagues) to exercise autonomy in ways that were derivative of a set of
views of teaching as a social practice. These were views that rested somewhat
uneasily with officially sanctioned policy, that regarded teaching and learning as taking care of themselves if only the vagaries of the market are allowed to prevail.

Keywords

educational change  school based management  teacher role
educational policy  student learning  teaching effectiveness

References


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