

The ‘Bastardisation’ of Teachers’ Work

This article stems from literature pertaining to the changing nature of teachers’ work. The last few years have seen a radical shift in the manner in which teachers are expected to perform their duties resultant of the wider set of economic, social and political forces that are impacting on society in general and education in particular. Thus, it is not uncommon to find teachers currently working within rigidly defined policy frameworks and guidelines; being subject to measurable outcomes and accountability mechanisms; involved with processes associated with the corporate and industrial sector; and teaching a curriculum associated with knowledge and skills relevant only to the workplace. These tensions in teachers’ work have resulted in the ‘bastardisation’ of teaching.

In Australia, current trends in educational restructuring can be characterised as a move from liberal welfare to corporate managerialist structures, discourses and agendas wherein the federal government aims to reel in state prerogatives through the tagged allocation of funding. Devolution, the development of national curriculum, the convergence of general and vocational education through competency-based training exemplified in technical and further education policy and practice, resolve into pressure on the education sector for efficiency and accountability (Lingard, Knight & Porter, 1993; Marginson, 1993; Rizvi, 1993). Great emphasis is placed on the development of capabilities or skills which satisfy the immediate demands of industry, achieved without public sector cost increases (Moore, 1987). Through devolution, deskilling, and calls for collegiality within a ‘new-age’ professionalism in line with decreed state prerogatives, teachers’ work has been usurped by ‘agents’ in the ‘field of production’ (Bernstein, 1990). As a result, teachers’ work has been reinvented. This reinvention is closely related to ‘changing economic imperatives’ in which schools and teachers have to compete in the market place (p. 7). Connell (1996) maintains that:

The view is that education is mainly a private good, for which individuals should, in principle, pay; that education institutions should be forced to compete with each other, to produce efficiency; that government provision is an ‘intervention’

in the market which should be reduced, if not eliminated, while private provision is increased. (p. 6)

Watkins (1986) describes the above phenomenon as a kind of organised labour in which teachers' work is enforced by a standardisation of work methods. Thus, teachers' work has become subject to bureaucratic organisational structures, centralised policy development, control over implementation and the criteria and processes of evaluation and accountability where 'the central administration formulates and assesses educational policies and the teacher presents these policies as school organisation, lesson materials and teaching procedures in the classroom' (Turney, 1975, p. 280). Within this conception, teachers' work is seen as an important means of production, as labour subject to rational analysis and which therefore requires organisation and supervision.

Robertson (1994) describes what is happening to teachers' work in this current restructuring:

A process of destabilisation has rapidly been followed by the implementation of a new set of exploitative and alienating regulatory controls over teachers' labour, with the precise purpose of extracting increasing levels of surplus value and hitching teaching firmly to the global economic agenda . . . [A]n exploratory analysis of the outcomes of this shift is revealing. The first outcome is a growing tendency towards the integration of tasks constituting teachers' work. This process has highlighted teachers' managerial role (e.g. management of students and other education workers) and de-emphasised their pedagogical one. The process of integration has also dramatically intensified teachers' labour. A second outcome has been the shift towards a process of reprofessionalisation. This has resulted in the establishment of a new set of regulatory controls over professional behaviour and competence, to be closely supervised by the state. (cited in Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000, pp. 7–8)

Robertson's (1994) analysis, coupled with 'flexible post-Fordist forms of production and restructured workplace organization; a greater reliance on market forces as a mode of regulation; more emphasis on image and impression management; resorting to increasingly technist ways of responding to uncertainty; and a greater reliance on technology as the preferred means for resolving complex and intractable social, moral and political problems'

(Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000, p. 3) have resulted in what I term ‘the bastardisation of teaching’ .

The ‘bastardisation’ of teaching

‘Bastardisation’, derived from the word ‘bastard’—‘something irregular, inferior, spurious, or unusual’ (*the Macquarie Dictionary*, 1999, p. 175)—aptly describes the nature of teachers’ work in a climate of educational change. To explain what I mean by the term ‘the bastardisation of teaching’, I briefly discuss some views about the role of teachers.

In the conventional sense, the teacher was perceived as the central agent in the formal learning process and in the lives of students at school. Well-motivated teachers were the most vital component of high quality education. Throughout their careers, teachers touch the lives of thousands of young people; without their commitment and participation, attempts to improve the school system are bound to fail. According to Connell (1993, p. 63), ‘learning is a full-blooded, human, social process, and so is teaching’.

Teachers have also been thought of differently with respect to their work. Some see teaching as an art; some see it as a craft that can be influenced by technique and professional judgement. To some, teachers are workers who need skills to perform predictable routines; to others, teachers are professionals who need to make judgements to apply highly specialised knowledge to achieve high standards in specific contexts. Amongst those who view teachers as professionals, some think teachers are like physicians; others think they are like researchers (Anderson, 1995).

It must be remembered that teaching involves more than gaining and exercising technical knowledge and skills. In this sense, teachers are not, for example, architects, applying their skills to draw a plan, but they are individuals who are able to improvise and devise new ways of looking at things. Teachers have to work within a personal but shared idea of the good—an appreciation of what might make good for human flourishing and well-being (Jeffs & Smith, 1990). What is more, there is little that is routine or predictable in teachers' work. As a result, central to what teachers do is the ability to think on their feet. Teaching is driven by dialogue and by certain values and commitments (Jeffs & Smith, 1990, p. 65). For Schon (1987, p. 13), the art of teaching is an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing. Through engaging with their experiences, teachers are able to develop maxims about their work. Teachers become what Eisner (1998) describes as 'connoisseurs'. For Eisner (1998, p. 63), connoisseurship 'can be displayed in any realm in which the character, import, or value of objects, situations, and performances is distributed and variable, including educational practice'.

Teachers have also been thought of as researchers. According to Hollingsworth (1995, p. 16), 'teacher researchers are concerned simultaneously with a) ways to improve their practice, b) change the situations in which they work, and c) understand their practices within the larger society'. Currently, learning about and developing the necessary skills and knowledge to complete teacher research is perceived as an important factor in teachers' work.

The abovementioned views of teachers and their work is in direct contrast to what is currently happening to teachers' work. To reiterate, teachers' work emphasises moves towards:

flexible post-Fordist forms of production and restructured workplace organisation; a greater reliance on market forces as a mode of regulation, rather than rules, regulations, and centralised bureaucratic modes of organisation; more emphasis on image and impression management as a way of shaping consumers;

a re-centralisation of control in contexts where responsibility for meeting targets is devolved; resorting to increasingly technicist ways of responding to uncertainty; and a greater reliance on technology as the preferred means for resolving complex and intractable social, moral, and political problems. (Smyth, 2001a, p. 35)

Smyth's (2001a) description of what is happening to teachers' work is indeed comprehensive and needs elaboration. The moves described above to link education directly to corporate industrial goals have meant massive shifts in the nature of teachers' work and teacher evaluation. Whilst there is no doubt that the economy is becoming increasingly central to education (Marginson, 1989; Pusey, 1991; Seddon, 1990), these shifts have resulted in what Robertson (1994, p. 145) describes as 'the adoption of virulent economic rationalist models which places education at the services of the economy'. Watkins (1993) points out that the effect of this is that:

The skills of teachers . . . [are] being isolated, fragmented and made more explicit so they can be more easily codified and measured. Such fragmentation and codification is but part of a labour process which leads to the 'proletarianization' of teachers (Freedman, 1988). Teachers are becoming deprofessionalised and deskilled. This labour process leads to increased workload of teachers, and a consequent deskilling of teachers because they have to rationalise and routinise their teaching. (p. 66)

Thus, it is not uncommon now to regard teachers as workers involved in a labour process within schools and classrooms as workplaces. With such a view of teaching, the teachers' craft is replaced by a battery of technical procedures, with the work being intensified as the number of tasks increases, and teachers' control of task and time declines. Some critics suggest that teachers are becoming more like industrial workers than middle-class professionals; more technicians than technologists (Seddon, 1990, p. 46). Thus, it can be argued that present programs that impact on teachers' work reflect a broader 'managerial' perspective based on economic rationalism, which views teaching as a technical activity. Despite a succession of administrative innovations that have been introduced to this end, they

all have been found wanting in that they have not made significant contributions in enhancing student outcomes (Papagianis, Klees & Bickel, 1982).

Commentators like Ball (1990a, 1994a), Popkewitz (1994), Gitlin and Bullough (1987), Apple (1996) and Robertson (1996) connect the declining state of the capitalist economies with the need to cut spending on education. Policies to restructure teachers' work are predicated on this major aim. Consequently, teachers' work is now perceived as a means to micro-economic reform, especially in Australia (Lingard, Knight & Porter, 1993; Marginson, 1993; Kenway, 1994). The pursuit of this policy has led to teachers being constructed technically or instrumentally as workers dealing with clearly specified economic outcomes. This can be seen, for example, in the adoption of notions such as human capital theory which reinforce this technical perspective (Porter, Rizvi, Knight & Lingard, 1992; Lingard, Knight & Porter, 1993). Teachers are no longer acknowledged as having discretionary judgement about what to teach and how to teach it. Competencies and standards are being put in place in teachers' work with the aim of achieving even tighter control over the teaching force, to supposedly enhance student outcomes, which will in turn add value to the employee base and contribute to the national economy (Mander, 1997). Teachers are becoming increasingly constrained to follow these tendencies while still maintaining the type of relational interaction and service ethic that they value and that society implicitly expects (Ball, 1994a; Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996).

Current moves in the form of devolution, competition, choice, autonomy, collegiality, collaboration, self-management, liberation management, teamwork and partnerships, networking and collegiality, flexibility and responsiveness (Smyth, 2001a) are all supposed to portray images of freedom in teachers' work; in reality they are merely fabrications.

The above discussion is indeed a far cry from the traditional role of teaching that primarily viewed teachers (as) agents of educational change and societal development (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991); one in which the moral purpose, according to Fullan and Hargreaves (1991), was to improve the lives of students in becoming better citizens. Teachers reconstructed and extended their moral purpose to become competent agents of improvement. In Fullan and Hargreaves' (1991, p. 9) terms, that image of teachers included: discretionary judgement; norms of continuous improvement; reflection in, on and about practice in which individual and personal development [was] honoured, along with collective development and assessment; and greater mastery, efficiency and satisfaction in the profession of teaching.

What we currently have is a scenario where teachers' work has been radically transformed by the rhetoric of corporate managerialism, self-managing schools, devolution, human capital theory, the marketisation of schools, commercialisation, knowledge commodification, internationalism, performativity, et cetera. These trends have radically altered the conventional nature of teachers' work—they have made teaching a 'generic' profession, thereby resulting in 'the bastardisation' of teaching.

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