



Pre-Service Student Reflection on the Nature of Teachers' Work

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The College of Education, Massey University Pre-service Teacher Education Programme for Primary Teachers has a compulsory paper titled Professional Inquiry and Practice 3. This paper focuses on political, ethical, social and contextual aspects of teachers' work. One of the assignments asks the students to reflect on the nature of and context of teachers' work as a labour process. The students are encouraged to illustrate their reflections with examples from their teaching experiences. We are grateful to Andrew Wood for sharing his reflection with us.

Given that education is a politically driven area (Codd, 2005), the timing of this reflection probably couldn't have been better given the recent general elections and how this election, like all elections, allows the different political parties to further voice their education policies to the public. These policies simply reflect the contrasting and sometimes conflicting philosophies and ideologies of education in this country at a particular time in history. Also, given that these policies can have a huge bearing on the nature of education within New Zealand, such as: the provision and distribution of education, content, structure, organisation, and pedagogy (Codd, 2005), it is important to understand how groups within our society contest what exactly it is that schools need to produce, do and achieve in terms of their cultural, political, economic and social goals.

The purpose of this reflection is to provide the reader with an understanding of the various political, social, economic and cultural influences that largely determine the nature and the context of teachers' work as a labour process. In other words, I will attempt to give an insight in to what it is that teachers have to do in their classrooms and the reasons behind what it is they do. The choices, decisions and actions of teachers in the classrooms have not been solely made as a result of the professional judgement that teachers have spent three or sometimes four years learning how to make. The reasons behind these choices, decisions and actions, instead, have had to be made within parameters that have been put in place as a result of various social, cultural, economic and political agendas.

The New Zealand education system has not seen any major restructuring since the late 1980s (Codd & Scrivens, 2005). However, the education policies developed during the latter part of the 1980s, which were dominated by right-wing economists' theories of how state institutions can be best made to serve the economic interests of the country (J. O'Neill, 2005), have continued to exert influence on teachers' work. Neo-liberalism and a free market ideology have increasingly been applied to the face of education within New Zealand and government policies have moved the education system closer towards a system

that would perhaps be best recognised as a competitive market system (Harold, 1998).

So, how does the state ensure that what teachers do will meet the state's goals for education?

The answer is control. Control is the central concept to understanding the labour process of teachers' work (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000). There are three main reasons why the state needs to control the work of teachers. The first reason is so the state receives the highest output of labour by the workers for the money that is spent on them and to ensure that the teachers actually do the work that is required of them, which has been designed by the state to best meet their own goals and objectives.

A second reason for control is to ensure that the employer (in this case the state), minimises their costs, consequently gaining a higher profit return. Because the state is the employer, the state's main function here is to ensure and support the growth of the state's capital. One way to achieve this is to reduce the costs of public sector activities (such as education) through having teachers do more work or by devaluing the work of teachers so the state can justify its position on paying teachers less for the work that is done.

Because education is an intensely politically-driven tool, the third and final reason for the state's control over teachers' work is concerned with powerful groups within society and the interests they have in education. For example, employers want skilled workers to enter the workforce, right-wing politicians want people who can contribute to the economic well-being of the country (Lee, 1992), in contrast to other New Zealanders who want to close the gaps between high and low achievers in education and to develop an inclusive society in New Zealand through having inclusive classrooms and schools (Ministry of Education, 2004).

Employer groups look for means to serve their own interests and one way to achieve this is to exert control over the institutions of the state, such as education (Codd, 2005). An example of groups looking to exert their control can be seen in the 1984 election of the Labour government which saw Treasury economists becoming a powerful influencing force in the governments' policy making (Codd, 2005). Education policies did not escape the economic reforms of that time and such economic ideologies continue to have a major influence in education policies today.

So what are the controls that the state implements over the work of their employees, which in this case are teachers? How does the state ensure that teachers meet the goals of education in this country? According to Smyth *et al.* (2000) there are three characteristics of what is called a control regime that ensures teachers will do the work that is required of them to meet the educational goals of the state:

- a) Having measures in place to direct teachers to impart a curriculum that defines all aspects of teaching, content, sequence and assessment.
- b) Having procedures in place where teachers will be supervised and observed and then evaluated in such a way to identify which teachers are not performing to the required standard according to the criteria that is consistent with meeting the state's educational goals through the curriculum.
- c) Establishing ways to discipline and reward workers in order to regulate and enforce compliance with the curriculum.

There are a number of ways that the state controls the work of teachers and these are achieved in both covert and overt ways (J. O'Neill, 2005). However, for the purpose of this reflection I will be focussing on curriculum, assessment and accountability as examples of the control of teachers' work and how these forms of control reflect the different ideologies of different groups in our society.

The New Zealand curriculum is a political tool that has been socially created, shaped and designed to achieve and meet the interests of various groups within our society. Curricula are designed to meet the interests of governments, business agendas, teachers, educators, parents, students and other bureaucracies (A-M. O'Neill, 2005) and the New Zealand curriculum is no different because *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* has been designed with the aim of meeting both the economic and social well-being of this country (Ministry of Education, 1993).

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework is an example of a tool that has been designed to control the work of teachers in schools. It reflects and sustains the social, cultural, economic and political values, assumptions, fundamental beliefs and what is valid knowledge in our society at that point in history. It is also an example of a technological regime of control.

Let's have a closer look at just how it controls the work of teachers. *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* establishes the principles and direction for all teaching and learning, identifies the essential skills to be learned by students, the national achievement aims and objectives for all students, and sets out the national direction of schooling in this country. It even states the attitudes and values to be developed within the school (Ministry of Education, 1993). It determines to a large extent the actions of teachers in the classroom. It also dictates and provides guidance on effective assessment practices.

It could be argued that teachers become puppets of the state by achieving the objectives of the state through the controlling force of *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*. As A-M. O'Neill (2005) suggests, it is through the official curriculum that teachers are expected, on behalf of the government, to prepare students for economic work and to help students develop the motivation and skills needed for young people to strive for success in their future lives.

It is this rationale that further highlights the need for control over teachers' work, for if this goal of education is to be met then the state needs to ensure there are means to ensure that teachers do what they need to so as to satisfy and meet this economic goal of education, which has been determined by various powerful groups in society.

Having discussed the ideologies behind the curriculum and the way in which the curriculum is the underpinning vehicle for the labour process of teachers' work, I'm going to now focus on the state's second and third characteristics of a control regime over teachers' work, that is: assessment and accountability. The official curriculum, how teachers are managed, supervised and enforced to comply with the curriculum, and the criteria used to evaluate teachers' work, are all socially constructed tools created with the purpose of ensuring teachers meet the state's goals (Smyth *et al.*, 2000).

According to the Ministry of Education (2004), the ingredient needed to successfully implement educational policy in schools is quality teaching. But the question here is what is effective or quality teaching and who defines what effective or quality teaching is? To fully understand this statement it becomes imperative to understand what it is meant by success, who has decided on this

definition of success, and the many implications these place on all that teachers need to do to fulfil the criteria of those who defined the term of success.

To illustrate my reflection I want to draw on my experiences during my final practicum. My Associate Teacher (AT) and I were required under school policy to have at least one piece of assessment completed by the class and then glued into the children's home books every week. These assessments were to be done on every single piece of work in class, such as story writing, maths tests, self evaluations and assessments on music, computer programmes that were used by the children, camp evaluations, and school trip evaluations as well as any unit assessments and evaluations.

The teacher had to make the assessment sheets up and also ensure they were able to meet the learning needs of the different children in the class because there were seven special needs children in the class with a varying degree of special needs. In addition to these requirements the teacher had to also keep a record of progress made by children in the class who had IEPs earlier in the year. We were also required to enter on the school's database results from any assessment that could be collated which were then used to measure and compare the achievement rates of Māori and non-Māori in the school. From what I understand, this information was sent to the Ministry of Education where it was collated for a national comparison of achievement rates between Māori and non-Māori.

It would appear to me that this class seemed very assessment driven. This was simply due to the nature of the policies that had been implemented within the school to meet the legal requirements stated in the curriculum framework and the NEGS and NAGS. Failure to meet these requirements of the school policies may have resulted in the teacher facing some sort of disciplinary action. However, this was a very rare occurrence because all the teachers were led to believe that these assessment requirements were a normal part of their school day and so to do otherwise was going against the culture of the school.

Everything that I do as a teacher is what teaching is 'about' and at times it has been difficult for me to really develop an understanding of all the increased workload placed on teachers. This became more obvious to me after speaking to my AT especially when he compared his workload as a beginning teacher ten years ago. The workload and consequent stress faced by teachers have increased as a result of the requirements created to meet the complex goals of the state. According to Smyth *et al.* (2000), through the ideological regime of control, the state has the ability to present ideas, language, values and beliefs in very covert ways designed with the purpose to organise teacher agreement to these values.

Ideological forms of teacher control have the ability to incorporate into educational circles the qualities needed by a person to then be called an effective teacher. This is achieved in very covert ways such as having selection and promotion criteria and/or a disciplinary system for those teachers who do not comply with the criteria of what it is believed to be an effective teacher in today's society.

According to the Ministry of Education (2004), assessment is an essential ingredient in effective teaching and effective and formative feedback is one of the most influential elements of quality teaching. In the 2003 Annual Report, *New Zealand Schools*, the Ministry of Education stated that priority must be given to embedding assessment in to schools for the purpose of learning. However, if we take a closer look at the rationale behind this decision by the

Ministry of Education on behalf of the state, then we can argue that this is an example of a form of ideological control by the state over teachers' work.

O'Neill and Scrivens (2005a, b) argue that assessment is a socially constructed political tool that has been created to provide evidence of what in education is working and as a way of holding teachers and schools accountable. Through the use of national assessment practices, which have been designed to measure how far schools have gone to meet (or have met) the targets set by political groups, the state is then in a position to judge how well schools, through their teachers, are meeting their own political and educational goals against national and international comparisons. If students should fail in schools, then the teacher is held accountable

Put bluntly, assessment is a covert way of holding teachers accountable and through this accountability the state is in a position to control the nature of teachers' work. Through these systems of control the state is able to regulate the behaviour of teachers' work, to normalise it so that the work done by all teachers is the same, and seen as everyday normal practices, so as to ensure the political ends of the state are met.

In conclusion, the nature and context of teachers' work plays a major influencing role in the labour process of teachers' work. Education is considered a public good and therefore it is understandable why there are many different sectors of the public who fight and contest the goals of education and what education in this country is trying to achieve. Some of these sectors of society are powerful enough to play a significant role in government policy making. When this does occur the state needs to ensure that, as employer, they have the means available to ensure their employees, in this case teachers, are doing what is required of them to meet the goals of the state. The means to guarantee this is through control and whether this control is through overt or covert methods (such as curriculum definition, teacher evaluation and accountability) the state is able to normalise and regulate the work of teachers so that teachers are lead to believe that what they are required to do in class is part of what it is to be a teacher.

This labour process is about the relationships between the teacher and the state and the control of the state over the teacher to meet the state's demands. The labour process is to do with the way teachers' work has been organised in a certain way to meet the state's goals. Therefore, seen in this light, it could be argued that education in this country is simply a means and not an end.

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Kia ora. I was brought up in Levin, attending Koputaroa Primary School and then Horowhenua College. After finishing secondary school I began teaching Māori in three primary schools in Levin. I did this for six years before deciding to enrol to gain a qualification as a teacher. I am still currently employed part-time at a school in Levin to teach Māori. I have just completed my third year as a student at the College of Education, Massey University, Palmerston North. In 2006, I am hoping to undertake postgraduate studies.